



THE 21st PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES

Selected by HERBERT VAN THAL



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The 21st Pan Book of Horror Stories

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edited by Herbert van Thal

The 21st Pan Book of Horror Stories

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Carolyn L. Bird and her agent, London Management Ltd, for 'The black bedroom'.

Carl Schiffman

Throwback

Richard Hargreaves' principal incentive to purchase a metal detector was purely and simply greed. His desire to find archaeological fragments in the soil was motivated only by avarice. He admitted this to himself quite openly. The outlay of ninety-five pounds on equipment he regarded as an investment, to be recouped by the sale of his finds. Already he had sold a bronze armlet and two arrowheads, of some unidentified metal, to a sly-faced little dealer in Guildford. He suspected that the trader would ask – and get – far more for them than he had paid Hargreaves, but even so, it was gratifying to find he could show a return on his purchase at this early stage.

The worst part about it was the digging, he reflected as he paced methodically across the field. It was exasperating to labour for anything up to half an hour and then find that the instrument had indicated the position of some worthless piece of twentieth-century junk. Old coins, now, these would be something worth finding. He wouldn't go to the dealer with them; send a photograph to some of the big specialists in London and see what they offered, that would be best.

The detector in his hands reacted suddenly and fairly strongly. He stopped immediately, marking the spot with his heel while he unslung the light spade from his shoulder. As he placed the metal detector on the grass he glanced round, searching for any observer. Farmers sometimes became unreasonably irate at finding strangers digging in their fields – Hargreaves winced as he remembered a headlong scramble to safety as a huge and terrifying Alsatian bounded snarling towards him across one particular field.

It wasn't as though he did any damage to their crummy land he thought, as he began to dig. He always replaced the earth when he'd finished, and like as not the ground was ploughed sooner or later anyway.

He grunted as the spade bit through the topsoil and began to

meet the chalky clay beneath. Slowly the hole grew larger, deeper. A crumbling wooden beam or stake was exposed. He levered it out, examined it cursorily – it had been badly charred – and tossed it aside. The possibility that it had been part of some long-vanished building did not occur to him; he would not have been particularly interested if it had. He toiled on, sweat blurring his vision.

He bent suddenly and scooped up a small flat disc. Impatiently he rubbed the cold earth from its surface. A coin! At last! Without pausing to examine it more closely he thrust it into the pocket of his anorak and resumed his digging.

Something long, tubular, and solid began to appear. He probed with the spade but failed to find the ends of it. Another piece of wood, probably. Might as well try to break it, then lever out the two halves. He raised the clay-smeared blade above his head, brought it down on the obstacle with all his strength. The blow jarred his arms, but the object remained intact. Must be a stout branch, he decided, studying it. It was infuriating to be held up in this way, when there might be enough coins under his feet to keep him for the rest of his life. He struck again, all his frustration and greed lending extra force to the blow.

A brilliant blue-purple flash seared his eyeballs. Stunning waves of shock blasted up his arms. He was dimly aware of being thrown up and back. The sky seemed to be flickering; bright-dark, bright-dark, faster and faster. The thought raced through his brain that the cylindrical object had been a high-powered electrical cable and he had sheared through it with his spade! As he fell back to the ground he wondered with a curiously calm detachment whether he was in the process of dying.

He landed on his back with a concussion that drove the air from his lungs, and lay on his side with his knees drawn up almost to his chin. After an eternity of painful gasping and whooping, life-giving air flooded back into his chest. He sat up slowly and carefully, feeling his arms and hands incredulously. They stung and throbbed, but there was not even a singed hair on the back of his hands to mark the passage of what he knew must have been a voltage sufficient to have scorched the flesh to the bone.

When his shocked mind had finally assimilated the fact that he had somehow escaped unscathed, he looked around him. A twisted piece of metal with fragments of blackened wood at one

end lay nearby. Some moments passed before he realized it was the remains of his spade. It did not seem possible that the current had done that to the implement and left him unharmed. He shook his head in disbelief and wonder, looking past the remains of the spade in search of the metal detector. It was nowhere to be seen, however, and neither was the hole he had dug. How far had he been thrown?

He rose shakily to his feet and stared round. The field had been surrounded by thick hedges – where were they? There was a thick wood on two sides of the field (where before he remembered only a few scraggy trees) and on the side where he had parked his car just inside the gate, there was a bank of earth piled about four feet high and running the length of the field.

At this point he noticed the houses. They bordered the fourth side; thatched, low-roofed structures with tiny glassless windows.

Hargreaves pressed his hands to his eyes. There could only be one explanation, and his reeling mind seized on it eagerly. He must have been knocked out by the electric shock, or by the fall perhaps – this new and changed field was a dream. How else explain these trees, the houses, and the vanished hedges? He opened his eyes again, hoping to find everything restored to normal. Instead, the first thing he saw was a man appearing between two of the buildings. He was shading his eyes with his hand, staring fixedly at Hargreaves.

A second man joined him, and a third behind him. They made no move to approach him, however. He shrugged and began to walk towards them. By the time he had reached them another three or four had arrived to swell the little crowd. They all regarded him with closed and watchful expressions.

‘Dumb yokels,’ he thought. ‘I could have lain there all day if I’d been hurt, before they’d moved. Don’t suppose they’ve got a phone even. I’ll have to get to a doctor somehow, though. Get a check up.’ The illogicality of seeking a doctor in what he had told himself must be a dream did not occur to him, however.

When he was within a few feet of the group, one of them raised a stout pole or staff he held. Holding it defensively at shoulder height, he shouted at Hargreaves: ‘Get thee back, witch! Return to your Master! We will have no truck with thee – get back, in the name of the Lord!’

Hargreaves stopped dead, staring at him. What was this gibberish? The man beside the speaker held his hands – palms pressed together – at his chin, and his lips moved silently. It was an absurdly stylized praying gesture. Hargreaves had never seen anyone make such a gesture before. The praying man's eyes were fixed on Hargreaves with a rigid stare that was almost frightening in its intensity.

‘What the devil are you on about?’ Hargreaves demanded roughly. ‘I only want to get to a doctor. Have you a phone here, or a car?’

They looked at him uncomprehendingly. He noticed their clothes for the first time. They looked – raw, somehow. Unfinished; home-made almost. The one with the stave wore a jacket of untreated leather and shapeless trousers of some sack-like material. His shoes were crude moccasins, and like the others he had a beard which looked as though it had been trimmed with a blunt knife. Their hair, too, was long and unkempt and raggedly chopped.

Abruptly he became aware of the smell. It was difficult to believe that it came from them. Hargreaves would never have imagined that human beings could smell like that. It was a fetid compound of stale sweat, unwashed clothing, excrement and sheer bodily dirtiness. It wafted towards him across the space that separated them, and his stomach heaved queasily. What kind of place was this?

Perhaps encouraged by his unease, they had moved forward in a ragged line, until he was almost surrounded. The leader gestured with his pole, and two of them sprang forward suddenly and seized his arms. He struggled in mounting fright and bewilderment, but they were surprisingly strong even though he stood at least six inches taller than them.

‘What the ’ell—’ he shouted. ‘Are you all crazy? Let go of me!’ The smell was overpowering. He ceased his struggles and stood panting between them.

‘Accursed wretch!’ spat one of them, ‘To the stake with him!’ He was half-dragged, half-led across the rough pasture and between the houses. They emerged into a wide space ringed by buildings. None was more than two storeys high, and all were thatched. Women and children crowded to the doors as he was forced towards a tall pole in the centre of the grassy ring.

'What goes, here? You, Martins, what do you with that man?' This peremptory query came from a tall, dark-haired man who strode from the door of one of the larger buildings. He held a silver tankard in one hand, as though he had been drinking from the middle of a meal. Hargreaves gained the door, however, that the building was not the speaker's.

The tall man halted in front of Hargreaves; his right hand rested on the hilt of a sword. He was better dressed than the others; his black cape was of a material far superior to their rough homespun garments, and a ruff of white silk at his throat set off the dark red trousers. His boots gleamed richly. He held himself with a casual arrogance.

'Your pardon, Sire,' said Martins, the man with the staff. 'This man is a witch. We would burn him—'

'And how is it that you usurp the power to decide who shall burn? Are you, perhaps, weary of being a herder? You would like to appoint yourself Sheriff of this district, eh? Stand aside, dog, and let me see your witch.' He pushed the ringleader aside and studied Hargreaves with narrowed eyes.

'Bring him into the inn,' he said suddenly, 'I would question him, and I will not stand on the green like a bumpkin at the fair. Bring him.' He returned to the inn without looking back to see if his order was being obeyed. Hargreaves was pushed forward by his two malodorous guards.

Inside the smell was worse, if anything. To the stench of unwashed bodies was added the fumes of poorly-fermented beer, and the huge wood fire contributed acrid smoke. There did not seem to be a chimney as such, merely a square hole in the low roof. The tiny windows admitted little light and less air. A fat, bald man stood behind a plank laid across three barrels.

The well-dressed man was sprawled in a high-backed wooden chair at the fire. Hargreaves was led forward and held in front of him.

'Well, are you a witch? No, you would not likely say yea if you were. Martins, how came you to find him? Well, out with your tale, you scum!'

Martins stepped forward. 'He appeared in Long Field, Sire. I saw a flash as of lightning and he flew down and landed in the field. I saw—'

'And did anyone else see this wonderful descent? For it was you, recall, that saw Mother Barrow turn into a hare and run across the meadow, yet when we put her to the pond, she sank. She was dead and I am of a mind to seek the truth with less haste this

word. My neighbour here, Will Sutcliffe, chanced to see her. —' A short, swarthy man was pushed forward, seeking a corroboration of the report, and faded back into

the crowd.

'Hmm. Anyone else?'

'No, Sire.' Martins seemed to have appointed himself counsel for the prosecution, thought Hargreaves. He wondered if the dream would end soon. Martins was going on eagerly, 'But some of those here heard him speak strange words.' Some of them muttered agreement, and one said: 'That is true, Sire. He spoke of the Devil, and Hell. And he said other things I did not understand.'

The dark-haired man nodded absently. He was studying Hargreaves' clothes.

'You do not seem like a peasant, fellow, and I have never seen such fine raiment, even at Court. That material your coat is woven from — I have travelled in distant lands, and seen many strange things, but ...' He fingered the sleeve of Hargreaves' anorak.

Hargreaves jerked his arm away savagely. Somehow he did not care for the solidity of his dream inquisitor.

'Take your hands off! Who do you think you are, anyway?' A sudden thought struck him. Evidently he was dreaming of some long-past time when man-made fibres such as the nylon of his anorak were undreamed of. It would be amusing to find out what period he had chosen. 'What year is this?' he demanded abruptly.

'Year? Why, what year should it be? If you have flown like a bird, you should have taken care not to land on your skull; the fall has addled your brain, I fancy.' A chorus of guffaws from the crowd greeted this jibe.

'As to who I am—' He broke off, staring at Hargreaves' watch, exposed on his wrist by his earlier recoil from the other's touch. 'That ornament on your arm — let me see it. Give it here, I say!'

'I'll see you in hell first.' At a signal from the seated man, Hargreaves was seized once more and the watch removed from

him – the bracelet snapping open more by accident than from any expertise on the part of his assailants.

It was handed to the nobleman, who turned it over in his hand, his forehead creased in puzzlement.

‘This is indeed of wonderful craftsmanship. How can a clock be so tiny? How came you by it?’ He studied the second hand as it swept round the face, held the watch to his ear, examined the stainless steel bracelet. His face darkened with suspicion and fear. ‘This was never fashioned by mortal hands! It is Satan’s work! Seize him, quick!’

Hargreaves was again held fearfully but securely.

‘As to who I am, I am Sir Edward de Cavaral, and it is part of my duties to rid this part of God’s England of such as you, that my people are not affrighted by your dabbings in the Black Arts. Take him to the cellar, and guard him well, I charge you!’

As Hargreaves was dragged away, he glimpsed Sir Edward casting the watch into the fire with an expression of fear and revulsion on his face.

He was hustled through a studded door and down a dark stone staircase. He was thrown violently into a small room in one corner of the cellar and the door pulled quickly to behind him. As he climbed to his feet he heard bolts dropping into place.

He turned slowly and glanced round the cell. It was empty except for a wooden barrel with its side stove in. The afternoon light filtered in through a small barred window high in the wall. He dragged the barrel over the stone floor and climbed on it to look through the bars. One of them seemed to be loose in the stone sill, and he grasped it and tugged.

His heart sank. A pair of legs moved across the window, and he heard their owner receive instructions from an unseen speaker to guard the window with diligence. No escape that way, then.

He sat for a long time on the cold floor, considering the events that had taken place since he entered that wretched field. Either he was experiencing an unusually vivid dream (but surely no dream could be so clear and sharp and detailed?) or he had somehow been hurled back in time by the power from the underground cable. He tried to remember in what century the fear of witchcraft had been a real and serious factor in everyday life. The fifteenth or sixteenth he suspected, without much certainty.

He looked at the coin he had found before he had cut through the cable. It was difficult to make out the details in the fading light, but he made out a date: 158-. The last numeral was undecipherable. Was that when he was now? An odd way of putting it, he thought drowsily: not *where am I*, but *when am I*.

He woke twice that night, once when a shadowy figure opened the door and stared at him by the light of a flaring lantern held over a dimly-seen head, and once when a rat ran squealing over his leg in the darkness.

He was kicked awake in the cold grey light of morning. Two men with wooden cudgels watched alertly as a third dragged him to his feet and pushed him through the door and up the steps. Again he detected that lurking fear he had seen in Sir Edward's face. In their superstition-riddled world, he realized, it was possible that he could use his necromancy to overpower them and escape.

Stiff and cold, he was led into the inn's public room again. A table – massive and ugly, with its wood unpainted – stood now in the centre of the room. Behind it sat three men. One of them was Sir Edward de Cavalar. In the middle, with a large silver crucifix before him on the table, sat a stout, grave-faced man in rich robes. He wore a kind of skull-cap on his head, such as rabbis wear. Beside him sat a small man in a loose grey robe with a cowl hanging down his back. He held a feather in one hand and had several sheets of greyish paper before him.

Hargreaves was positioned before the table, two men behind him. He was shivering and his bones ached. 'Probably caught a chill from sleeping on that streaming floor,' he thought miserably. Close behind this thought came another: 'If this is not a dream, if it really is happening, I'll be lucky if it has time to run its course.' For he remembered with a curious emphasis the peasant's fearful yet exultant shout in the field yesterday: 'To the stake with him!' 'My God,' he thought with the first real fear he had felt. 'They might *burn me!*'

Reasonable sanity assured him that nothing of the sort would happen. 'I'll wake up soon, find myself in a hospital bed, bandaged. But, Lord, it *is* a vivid nightmare!'

The man in the middle of the trio at the table had been observing him closely. He had small, pig-like eyes. When he spoke at last, it was to Sir Edward.

'You were right, he does have an odd look to him. See, his clothes; where is the tailor that could cut and stitch so cunningly? And you say he had a tiny clock on his arm? A pity you destroyed it; you should not have done that. Still, you did right to summon me.'

The nobleman's manner had undergone a subtle change. He seemed subdued, and merely nodded submissively at the other's words.

Hargreaves' sense of unreality and hunger-fanned hysteria welled up in him. He heard himself say, 'You, you fat figment! And what title do *you* hold? High Emperor of the Unconscious? Priest of dreamland? My conscience, perhaps?'

The guard behind him struck him viciously in the back with his club, and he fell on his knees, clutching at the table for support. The crucifix swayed and tottered, firelight glinting from its polished surfaces.

'Show proper respect to my Lord Bishop, you bastard.' His voice came dimly to Hargreaves, down a tunnel of pain.

When he was once more able to stand, he was questioned closely for a long time. The questions flowed past his mind; he answered but hardly knew what he said. Only the Bishop and Sir Edward addressed him – the little cleric sat bent over his parchment, scribbling furiously with the quill. Recording question and answer, Hargreaves supposed, but it did not seem important. Nothing seemed important any more; only the frightful pain in his back where he had been struck, and the belief that this was not really happening – that was of great importance, he knew. Even as he spoke, answered questions, he was repeating fiercely to himself: 'It is not real. It is a nightmare. These things do not happen in real life. Soon I will wake.'

He became aware that there were no more questions. The Bishop and Sir Edward were conferring in low tones. He caught snatches of their talk:

'... crazed or an agent of Satan.'

'Aye, but his attire, his hair, the perfumed smell, all these seem ...' 'Perfume? Of course,' he thought, his after-shave of yesterday morning. Even after a night in a cellar, he still smelled sweet to these savages. The Bishop's robes were reasonably clean, he saw, but his fingernails were crusted black, and he had what looked like

old smallpox scars on his face. The nobleman's face and neck showed grey traces of ingrained dirt. He had a cluster of blackheads beside his nose. The little cleric had smiled once at something Hargreaves had said, and had revealed blackened and rotting teeth. And these were the upper classes! Small wonder he seemed excessively clean and well-groomed to them.

The muttered dialogue went on, drone, drone, buzz, buzz. It was important that he should know what they decided, he knew that, but he was so tired, and his back ached . . . but he heard some of it:

'What do you make of his talk of metal-finding machines?'

'I confess I am sorely puzzled, Sir Edward, unless he means magnetic stone – lodestone?'

'And striking a – what was it – cable, filled with great power. I can make no sense of it.'

'Nor I. It may be, of course, that his traffickings with the Evil One have turned his brain. I have read of such cases.'

'Then he is a witch, you think?'

'I see no other way to explain his magical appearance in the field behind the village. Your villeins seem honest – if stupid – men. You say you have seen a deep mark in the soil, as of a body landing?'

'That is so, my lord Bishop, in the field. Also, I found the piece of metal and charred wood I showed you – and mark this, my lord, there were footprints leading away from the spot, and yet none going to it.'

'The evidence seems incontrovertible, in truth. Also,' he leaned closer to Sir Edward. 'Also, if he *is* a witch, and we let him go free, we put our own souls in mortal danger, you realize that?'

Sir Edward shuddered. 'The stake, then.'

'I think it the best course. If he is guilty, through suffering shall he be saved from the eternal sufferings of Hell.'

The Bishop spoke for some minutes in Latin; addressing an uncomprehending Hargreaves. It looked as though these phantoms from his mind were condemning him to burn. Well, he would wake soon, and they would vanish like snow on a stove.

The light in the village green outside hurt his eyes. A low murmur went up from the crowd – men, women, children, who were waiting there. He blinked round foolishly. As they tied his hands behind him – the wet thongs cut into his wrists and he marvelled

again at the realness of the nightmare – he made out a huge pile of brushwood, branches, logs, piled high in the centre of the grassy area. A thick pole stuck up out of it. He was led through the mob towards it. A woman drew away, a man spat. The low babble of voices grew into a chant: 'Burn the Witch, Burn the Witch!'

He found himself being lifted up onto the pile, and secured firmly to the pole with more wet thongs. He gazed round with a foolish smile on his face. Soon he would wake, and he wanted to try to remember all the details. The Bishop and Sir Edward stood at the door of the inn. At the window beside them, he thought he could make out the white, moon-like face of the innkeeper.

An odd crackling, snapping sound made him look down. Smoke drifted upwards and over him, staining the clean sky. After a short time, during which he told himself that he must wake, that this had gone far enough, he felt the heat on his legs. He found that his trousers were burning, the artificial fibre melting and dropping in fiery tears on his shoes.

As the flames ate through his flesh and bared the bones of leg and ankle, it was borne upon him that this was no dream, that it was all too real, that he was in fact burning in the fifteenth century. And he found that it was unbearable, undreamed of agony. He screamed and screamed until the thick stinking black smoke mercifully suffocated him.

Thomas Muirson

The Gibbet Inn

The village was tiny: a few scattered cottages straggling along the road, a triangle of green, a small pub and three shops – the latter best described as ‘old-fashioned’. I parked opposite the pub and crossed the road.

The sign hanging over the entrance said ‘The Gibbet’, and was adorned with a stark painting of a gallows complete with noosed rope. I pushed open the door and entered, ducking my head under the lintel.

Like the village, the interior of the inn was deserted. A few plank-topped tables stood on the stone floor, and a wooden bench ran the length of one wall. The place was dim and musty. I tapped on the bar. After a few moments a woman emerged from the gloomy recesses at the back. She stood silent and unresponsive, staring down at the floor.

‘A pint of bitter, please.’ My voice roused odd echoes in the stillness. She worked a pump handle below the counter; evidently modern aids such as electric pumps had not yet made their appearance here. The glass was placed on the counter without a word, and she turned away, leaving the money I had put down untouched.

‘Unusual name your pub has.’ The continuing silence was beginning to grate on my nerves. Her back stiffened and she turned slowly. I went on: ‘Do you know why it is called “The Gibbet”, by any chance?’ Unexpectedly, she laughed, a soft wheezing laugh that held no joviality. It was an oddly inappropriate sound from such a woman in such a place; as though a nun had sworn in a chapel or a roadmender had recited poetry to his shovel.

‘Oh, yes, I can tell you that.’ Her voice was a whispering croak, it occurred to me that this was why she had not spoken before; that she suffered some speech defect. ‘They hanged my father across the way, on the village green, you see.’

This shocking and unbelievable statement was delivered with such a matter-of-fact air that I accepted it at first, without thinking.

'They?'

'The villagers.'

Reason returned. 'But, but that's impossible! Ordinary people can't—' I thought of the flat, empty land that stretched away on every side, thought of the isolation of this tiny community. Could it be that such a thing had happened, that a lynching had taken place here, once? I shook my head to clear away these fantasies. This was England, where the law was maintained by men in blue uniforms, where justice was meted out by bewigged judges and punished by dispassionate gaolers.

'They did, anyway. Hanged him for murder.' Her barely understandable voice, cold and flat and unarguably certain, rocked the foundations of my accustomed beliefs. She regarded me without expression, without interest, looking up at me from her down-tilted face. Unwillingly, as though by pursuing the matter I was giving it reality, I asked, 'Who was murdered?'

'A village lad, Tom Reynolds.'

'Why, then?'

'He – got me in trouble.'

As I digested this unemotional assertion, the door behind her swung back with a crash that made me jump.

'Ellen! What you a-telling this gemmun?'

He was fat; obese and disgusting to look at. His body quivered with fat under the grimy apron. He seized the woman's arm and jerked her away from the bar, his piggy little eyes darting at me insolently. The woman, her head still hung submissively down, said nothing.

The blow left a white weal across her cheek. She fell back against the wall, a bottle falling to smash beside her feet. Her head was rocked back by the impact, and I saw a dark red cavity agape below her chin, like the gill of a fish. The edges were white and bloodless, like dry lips. I stared, unable to understand what I saw.

The fat man strode wobbling to the counter. 'Get out, mister. Out.' His voice, like the woman's, was abnormal: a dry whisper. Close to, I saw that his little eyes protruded unnaturally, pushing out past the eyelids, staring wildly. His head was cocked sideways, as though he listened for something.

I turned and pushed out through the door into the sunlight. As I hurried across to my car I noticed that the village street was still empty. No, not quite: as I turned the ignition key with trembling fingers I glimpsed a thin, ragged-clothed man enter the pub. I thought he was grey-haired, yet his walk was that of a young man.

Driving quickly out past the last tumbledown cottage, I saw a crude sign in the mirror and twisted round to read it: Manton. A huge lorry on the main road ahead breathed diesel fumes at me and I returned my attention to the business of driving.

Back in the prosaic everyday world once more, with shiny new cars whirling past, the events in the gloomy little pub began to assume a more acceptable aspect. Of course the woman's throat had been encircled by a red and white scarf; the light in the inn had been dim. The landlord, if the fat man had been the landlord, had had protuberant eyes: so had many fat men. And if his head had lolled to one side, well, doubtless there was some sane and rational explanation for that too. He had certainly had a violent temper.

Ahead, an interesting spire looked over a tree-fringed cemetery. I slowed the car, bumped over the grass verge, and stopped. A quiet old country church would provide a pleasant break from this dusty, oil-stained highway, and if it was locked I could wander round the churchyard. Then, perhaps, I would forget the Gibbet Inn.

The church was not locked – few country churches are, I have found – and I pushed open the heavy door and went in. I walked softly and aimlessly round the place, studied the windows, tried without success to decipher a worn Latin inscription on the wall above the pews.

A diffident cough made me turn with a faintly guilty start. A small, tubby man with the clerical dog-collar beneath a mild and blinking face was standing at the door. He waved away my apologies.

'Not at all, not at all. We are always glad to welcome visitors. There is little of interest here, I am afraid, though the chancel is very fine and the windows are, I think, better than most to be seen in a church of this size.'

We considered the windows. Unable to discuss his church in a knowledgeable manner with him, I turned to the subject of the inn I had visited.

He listened with grave attention. When I had finished, he shook his head.

'There was indeed a village of that name, some six miles from here. But (unless you are perpetrating some stupid joke, and I do not think that you are) I do not see how you could have . . .' He rubbed his ear in puzzlement. 'Look here, will you come into the house? It is almost three; my housekeeper will shortly be bringing in afternoon tea. And I have some records, documents, which might help us to understand what you have seen.'

He showed me first an old map, dated 1817, which clearly indicated the village of Manton. But a more modern map showed no such village; only a lonely farmhouse labelled 'Manton Farm'. The little community had died out, the vicar told me, about 1870; 'There are thousands of such extinct villages in England. The younger folk drifted to the towns with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, and the old people simply died.'

Next was an entry in the church records, made in 1783. It concerned the burial of one Ellen Elisabeth Farley, spinster, aged twenty-nine. At the end of the entry was the word *Suicide*, in brackets.

'She is buried on the north side of the churchyard. These unhappy people were invariably buried in unconsecrated ground, as you probably know.' I nodded dumbly.

An old diary, kept by the incumbent of the parish in the 1770s, was produced. The spidery, faded ink meticulously recorded births, deaths, marriages, newcomers, church matters, gossip; all sorts of daily happenings in the district. Born in a later age, the Reverend Peter Cruikshank would probably have been a reporter or a gossip columnist instead of a vicar.

His present-day counterpart flicked through the yellowing pages. His pink finger pointed to an entry. 'There it is. August tenth, 1775.' He read out the account. It described in detail how Jacob Farley, the landlord of the Rising Sun in Manton, had, 'fouly murdered Tom Reynolds, of that village, after the discovery that he had lain with Ellen Farley, his only daughter.' The murder had been committed in a sudden fury, apparently, and Farley had not even troubled to wash his victim's blood and brains from his hands. The wooden stake which had been used was found lying near the back door of the inn. It, too, was bespattered with blood.

The Squire was away; there were no police or magistrates in these parts, in those days. Jacob Farley was dragged out on to the village green and hanged without the benefit of a trial. 'I am reliably told that his daughter watched the hanging from an upper window of the inn. It is said that she laughed.'

For some eight years after this, she had continued to run the pub, but with one difference: she renamed it 'The Gibbet'. As the village's population dwindled, so did her trade and, at last, in debt (and probably more than half mad) she had cut her throat with the jagged edge of a broken bottle.

As we studied these horrors from another age, the housekeeper brought in afternoon tea. She was a small, neat woman with grey hair. The Reverend Jenkins addressed her as Mrs Taylor.

'Your family has lived in this district for many generations, has it not? I myself,' he added to me deprecatingly, 'am a comparative newcomer. No doubt Mrs Taylor has heard of the Gibbet Inn and its dark history.'

Mrs Taylor had; the story was part of local folklore. Small recalcitrant children, it seemed, were still threatened with a visit from the fearful landlord. 'And I've heard grown men say they've seen lights about the spot where the inn was, though I daresay that's caused more by alcoholic spirits than any other kind.'

'Has anyone ever seen the landlord or his daughter?' I asked.

'Not the landlord, sir, that I know of; or the girl. But the farm-hand that was done away with, he's been seen three times – by three different people, that is – and by an unfortunate chance each of the three died soon after.'

My host rose from his chair and replaced his cup on the tray with a noisy clatter. 'Thank you, Mrs Taylor, most informative. Most informative.' She collected the tea things and left.

'Surprising, is it not, how superstition still persists in these rural areas, quite surprising.' He cleared his throat uneasily. 'But I am glad it was the landlord you saw, and not Reynolds.'

'That makes two of us.' Despite his reassurances as he saw me out, I was conscious of a vague disquiet. Under our civilized sophistication lies a frightened savage beset by primitive terrors.

Back once more behind the wheel of my car, again a part of twentieth-century Britain, I regained a measure of scepticism. I even formed a passable explanation of the matter: I had stopped

on the site of the abandoned village, had fallen asleep in the car (it had been hot and stuffy) and the emotions of the participants in that old tragedy, printed on the stones somehow, on the place itself, had been received by my sleeping and receptive mind, and given rise to an unusually vivid dream. After all, I reasoned as I drove back the way I had come, if intangible sound waves can be printed on a magnetic tape and played back, why not anguish and terror and fury?

I saw the side road that had led from the long-gone village, and turned the wheel. What would I find at the spot where I thought I had seen a village? Overgrown ruins knee-deep in weeds? Or only fields and hedges blotting out all trace of the foundations? The sign at the side of the road was not there; neither were the cottages I had passed.

There was a triangle of green, though: a farm track ran off the road on its far side. I slowed, then drove on. The place was not deserted this time: a lone figure trudged along at the side of the road. As I approached, he glanced over his shoulder, stopped, and turned to face me as I drove past.

I am not sure how I managed to drive the ten miles or so to my home. Fortunately, most of the way was over minor roads with little traffic, for I drove like a robot, unconsciously steering the vehicle while always before me hung the memory of what I had seen. He had been a thin, ragged figure in blood-spattered clothes, with his head terribly crushed, beaten in. The thing that sickened me, that constantly returns before me now and turns me cold, was the way his grey and pink brains had oozed from his shattered skull and trickled down his bruised and eyeless face.

Now I am home, and it is dark outside the windows, and I sit and wait. The housekeeper's words run through my mind: 'The farmhand that was done away with, he's been seen three times ... each died soon after.' Of course it is all nonsense.

Ian C. Strachan

The incidents at Scanham

As far as can be ascertained, it was a lorry driver, Mr Norman Ellis, who first saw the creatures that came to be known by the collective term 'The Scanham Terror'. They crossed the Nottingham to Newark-on-Trent road in front of him on the night of 16 February. He describes them as quick-moving, whitish in colour and – in his words – 'soft-looking'. However, as he glimpsed the group (he thinks there were about ten in all) only momentarily in the beam of his headlights, his impressions are necessarily lacking in detail.

But if we apply the facts now in our possession to earlier records, it becomes evident that the incidents that took place in and around the village of Scanham between 14 March and 27 May 1978 were not the first excursions into human affairs by these beings.

There is, for example, the entry in the journal of the Reverend Josiah Hallam, vicar of Scanham from 1688 to 1724. Dated 3 July 1703, it reads: *Buried this day the remains of Elisabeth Farrars, widow, aged fifty-seven years.* There is a note in the margin in the same hand: *The fourth victim of the sickness that has appeared in our midst. God grant that she is the last.*

She was not, as later entries testify. Twenty-two subsequent burial records in the journal have similar notations, the last – dated 29 September of the same year – merely having *of the sickness* scribbled under it.

Slightly more informative is the old letter found in 1964 in a house in Nottingham during reconstruction work. It is from a kitchenmaid at Scanham Grange, and bears the date 5 August 1703. It is headed *My Deare Sister*, and contains the following significant reference: *... and another childe has been taken, the son of a labourer in the village.* It was found out of its cott, and not a drop of blood in its body. *The parents are inconsolable.* (sic).

The last piece of evidence to show that Scanham has previously

been visited by these terrible predators is a poster issued by the London and Yorkshire Stage Coach Company, of Wells Street, London. It too is dated August 1703, and advises intending passengers that, *No coaches shall halt at the village of Scanhame, but will deliver passengers to that destination outside the Pheasant Inn, on the Lowdhall crossroads.* It hangs today in the hallway of the Pheasant Inn, and is a grim reminder of the ill-repute which must have attached to the name of Scanham that summer.

Incidentally, it is worth noting at this point that the spring of 1703 was remarked on in contemporary records for its exceptionally heavy rainfall, flooding being reported in many low-lying areas. It is also a matter of record that the last two months of the winter of 1978 saw prolonged and heavy snow and rain. This, as we shall see, was to have some bearing on the events that were to follow.

On the morning of 27 February 1978, Mr George Smallwood, LRCVS was called out by a local farmer to inspect eleven dead cows. The veterinary surgeon was sufficiently puzzled and disturbed by what he discovered to report the case to the Ministry of Agriculture. By some unfortunate oversight the report was acknowledged and then lost in the Ministry's files.

Mr Smallwood was to be summoned to two other farms in the locality within the next ten days, and in each case he found the same odd and inexplicable injuries on the carcasses. The wounds were most frequent on the flanks and belly of each animal, and occurred in pairs. Each perforation of the skin was perfectly circular, and penetrated to a depth of about two or three inches. The two holes in each pair were spaced two to three and a half inches apart.

But the aspect of the deaths that most puzzled the vet was the complete absence of blood in the animals. It was as though their throats had been cut in the traditional Jewish manner: with the animal suspended while still alive, and its throat cut to allow the blood to drain out. This was the comparison that Mr Smallwood made, but it was not an exact one, for there was no blood on the ground, and only traces on the wounds.

No blame can, I think, be attached to Mr Smallwood for failing to raise the alarm at this point. He had admitted himself baffled as to the cause of death; he had reported the facts to the authorities;

and he had advised the farmers to secure their livestock in enclosed premises at night. What more could he do? If anyone is to blame for the lack of proper investigation, it is the unknown clerk who mislaid the original report. But it is unlikely that anyone, at that stage in the matter, could have deduced the impossible truth and forecast the terror that was to come to a quiet Nottinghamshire village.

A report in the *East Notts Advertiser* 14 April is the next item relating to the case. It tells of the disappearance of an elderly recluse, Harold Ingham, who occupied a tumbledown shed that belonged properly to the disused colliery nearby, the workings known locally as Johnson's Pit. Because of the hermit-like nature of the old man's existence, it was not until a rare call by a social worker (the first in over a fortnight) discovered his absence, that a search was made. There was, of course, no way of telling exactly when the old man had vanished. The news report mentions some signs of a struggle in the wretched hovel. Intensive police activity failed to reveal any trace of the recluse, and in view of the other incidents, it seems unlikely that any will ever be found.

We turn now to the happenings of the evening of Sunday 13 April. It will be necessary to explain first that Scanham at that time still retained a rather archaic telephone system whereby a subscriber could call any other local number in the normal way, but additionally, could be connected with all the other numbers by dialling three noughts in succession. I have tried to discover how this unique system came to be installed, but of the many explanations I have been offered, only the one that suggests it was in order to alert the village in the event of an accident at the local coalmines seems at all feasible.

On the evening in question, at about nine forty-five, a score of people picked up their receivers in answer to the continual ringing that signalled an all-numbers call, and heard a woman's frantic voice: 'Help us! They're all round the house! Help! Oh God—' The startled listeners heard a crash of breaking glass, and a man's voice in the background. Most are agreed that it shouted: 'The windows! They're gett—' and then silence. The phone was evidently still off the hook, however, for a woman's scream was heard, faintly, followed by an unaccountable sucking, gulping sound, mingled with a fainter cry of unutterable terror and loathing.

You must try to picture these ordinary, matter-of-fact people, going about their normal weekend routine, suddenly confronted with this totally unexpected and unnerving occurrence. They stood confounded, then everyone was speaking at once. The lines were a babel of confusion.

Some time passed before a cooler head made himself heard and proposed that each one call off his name and number in turn, in an attempt to identify the caller who had so disconcerted them. There was nothing to be heard from that line now; the sounds (whatever they signified) having died away.

Eventually only one name remained unreported, and a dozen voices spoke it: the Thwaites. The Thwaites family – Mr and Mrs Thwaites and their two grown-up sons – lived about three-quarters of a mile from the village, and their nearest neighbour was almost half a mile distant. It was immediately agreed among the alarmed group on the telephone that a party of menfolk should set out for the lonely house to investigate.

Nine men met in the centre of the village and drove in two cars to the Thwaites' house. They found a scene of appalling destruction awaiting them. Three of the groundfloor windows were completely gone, burst inwards so that glass and broken wood lay on the carpets. The furniture lay tumbled and smashed. But it was the sight of the bodies that stopped them white-faced and sick in the open front door. The two boys lay in the hall. Roger, the eldest, held a poker in one hand. It seemed as if they had been attempting to escape, for the front door was unlocked and stood half-open. Mr Thwaites lay in the doorway of the kitchen. Of Mrs Thwaites there was nothing to be seen, though her shoes were later found in the back garden. There, too, the tracks were found that were at that time such a mysterious feature of the tragedy. They were to become all too familiar in later weeks.

The police officer hastily called from nearby Wyndham (Scanham has no police station) cleared the posse of sobered men from the premises, made one cursory examination of the ravaged house, and sent without hesitation for assistance from Nottingham County Headquarters.

Old Dr Bowman's statement concerning the three bodies read almost exactly like that of the vet, Mr Smallwood, on the dead cows. Complete absence of blood in the corpses, circular punc-

tures; especially numerous in the legs and thighs – the cause of death, whatever it was, the same. Mr Smallwood came forward to add his evidence when the London pathologist arrived: gradually the authorities began to conclude that something out of the ordinary was abroad in the Scanham area – a conclusion which had already been arrived at by the villagers.

In the press, there was an abundance of theories to account for the deaths; in Scanham there was a wave of fear. The only ironmonger in the locality sold his entire stock of doorlocks, door-chains, and metal bars. Scanham took on the appearance of a besieged city. Shotguns were loaded in lonely farmhouses and placed handily near the door. It became unusual to see a solitary walker after dark.

There were as many theories and explanations to be heard in Scanham as there were people. Invaders from outer space, a homicidal maniac, vampire bats – or a vampire of the genus *Dracula*, depending on the taste of the theorist; all those and more were to be heard, and some even more unlikely.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the contributions of Tom Brennan, a seventy-year-old ex-miner, went unheeded. But in view of the subsequent discoveries, it is only fair that his story should be retold here and attributed to him.

He had been employed all his working life at Johnson's Pit, first as a coal-face worker, then as operator in the lifthouse. This was the name given to the building that contained the machinery which worked the hoist used to convey men and materials down the deep shaft to the mine. The crude signalling device (a wire running over pulleys to operate a bell at the top) began ringing one afternoon at about four o'clock. This was unusual, as the shift was not due to finish until six p.m. The last time it had been rung before finishing time, it had been an injured miner who had come up on the hoist. Brennan pulled over the lever that engaged the gears, and the hoist began its slow descent.

His back was to the hoist when it arrived at the top of the shaft. He was making ready the stretcher and blankets that might be needed. It was the sobbing, he says, that made him turn. Not the sobbing of an injured worker – he had heard that before, often enough – but the feeble cries of someone pushed into witless lunacy by an overpowering fear.

It should be borne in mind that Tom Brennan had never heard the account given by the lorry driver, Ellis, of the queer creatures seen on the roadway. It is all the more remarkable, then, that his description of the sight that met his eyes as he turned bears such a close resemblance to that statement.

The ex-mineworker's report is best told in his own words: 'When I turned, there was Colin Jarvis lying flat, and Billy Corrigan – it was him that was whimpering – on his knees alongside him, and all round them on the hoist were these whitey-grey toadstool-looking things, darting at the two of them. Worrying 'em, if you take my meaning, like dogs worrying sheep. Not toadstool shaped exactly; but that's what came into my mind first, when I turned.'

It is not clear whether his arm struck the lever as he stepped back, or whether he actually set it in reverse as an unthinking response to the scene before him. Brennan himself is evasive on this point. I am inclined to believe that the latter explanation is the true one: he pulled the lever over both to prevent the creatures advancing into the lift-house and to remove the horrid sight from before his eyes. What is indisputable is that the ancient winding equipment failed under the sudden strain (and possibly the considerable weight of the white things) and plunged to the bottom.

The impact may have been the cause of the collapse of the mine roof far below. It is equally possible that the supports in the tunnels had been damaged by the creatures as they invaded the mine. In any event, it seems all too likely that seventeen men were already dead in the tunnel before the collapse. Probably the two who arrived at the top, with the loathsome creatures around them, had been at the hoist end of the tunnel, and had almost made their escape when they were seized. It is not pleasant to visualize that scene far beneath the surface, as the miners were attacked and overpowered in the dimly-lit passages, and two terrified men waited an eternity for the hoist descending in answer to their frenzied summons.

The official inquiry into the disaster at the pit found that the collapse was due to causes unknown (Brennan testified only to sending down the hoist in answer to the bell, and hearing the rumble of the fall seconds later: naturally he said nothing about what he had seen). It was found to be impossible to send investigators down, since the blockage was complete. A tentative con-

clusion that flooding had been involved was touched on in the report; for this reason it was recommended that the pit be left closed. There was some relief at the decision in the community; Johnson's Pit had always been regarded as an 'unlucky' pit, though no one knew why, exactly.

The next part of this account also comes from an eye witness, Miss Janet Wilson, a twenty-seven-year-old district nurse from Wyndham. I must admit to being very favourably impressed by this young woman's strength of character, the evidence of this being amply provided by the fact that her ordeal has left her virtually unaffected: though she confesses to a certain dislike of dark country lanes, and the sight of a frog leaping in a ditch has, she says, given her a sleepless night.

Her round on Thursday 18 May was completed much later than it should have been. She was delayed at one visit, and another (the most distant) proved to be a waste of time, the patient having gone out. On the way back home her tiny moped began to give trouble. At last, on a long straight stretch of road not far from Scanham, it misfired and spluttered to a halt.

There was no alternative but to push the machine to Scanham, leave it somewhere safe, and catch a bus on to Wyndham. She knew she had about a mile and a half to go before Scanham's street lights became visible. It was now after sunset, but the evening sky still held some light. The woods on either side of the road, however, were thick and dark.

She first noticed the movements on the road behind her in her handlebar mirror when she had been walking for about fifteen minutes. At first she thought it might be a cyclist approaching, but the white flicker came in the glass again, and she observed that it was not the steady progress of a cycle, but several objects leaping or hopping on the road.

She stopped and looked back up the dark-bordered lane. There was now nothing to be seen. Birds, perhaps, she thought, and walked on at a rather quicker pace.

She glanced back once or twice as she reached the top of a slight incline. The second time, there was something just visible in the gloom. It was impossible to make out its shape, but it seemed to be about four or five feet tall, as nearly as she could judge. It was motionless as she stared, and then with a speed that struck her as

unnatural somehow, it sprang or hopped in a series of quick leaps into the undergrowth beside the road.

Now she could see the lights of Scanham ahead, bright against the night. She would be in the village within minutes. A rustle of leaves on her left reached her: it sounded loud in the stillness. She fixed her eyes on the lights in the distance and walked purposefully on. After a few minutes she became aware that something was moving in the woods on her right. She did not turn her head, but her eyes swung in that direction, and she caught sight of something light in colour, flitting between the trees. Her heart bumped painfully in her chest. The moped was impeding her, but she dared not break her stride to lay it down. The rustling on her left was loud and unmistakable now: she knew without looking that something or things were stealthily pacing her on that side also.

She considered, seeking her best plan of action. Her first impulse, to scream for help, she rejected. There was no house nearby; the road ran between woods and fields almost to Scanham. There was no way of getting help out here. She felt cold despair mingle with her fear.

But Miss Wilson, as I have said, is a girl with a certain strength of character, and she is not without resourcefulness, it seems, also. Without breaking her stride, she reached down and unscrewed the petrol cap on the moped's fuel tank, then pulled her lighter from her coat pocket. In one swift movement she had the machine laid over on its side and applied the lighter flame to the petrol that gushed over the side of the tank.

The liquid flared with a blue-tinged flame, and even as she began to run for the distant village, it was extending itself in a blazing stream across the narrow road. Her shadow danced in front of her as she fled. She was unable to resist a quick look over her shoulder. The creatures were clearly outlined in the woods. She did not look back again, but ran as she had never run in her life.

We know now that the skin and eyes of the Scanham Terrors are unused to light of any kind; and flame is a new and terrible thing to them. Miss Wilson's action, therefore, was perhaps the best she could have chosen. They cringed back from the heat and the flames' light.

But she was not yet safe. She had stopped on the edge of the village, and clung to the fence of the first house, gasping for breath.

Looking back the way she had come, she saw her pursuers drawing near – much nearer than she had thought they could be. The faint light of the street lamps picked them out as they bore down on her. She took one disbelieving look and fled to the gate of the house. It gave under her rush, and she reeled up the short path, darkness swirling in her mind. She used her last reserve of strength in a scream – a wordless cry for help.

The house was that of Mr John Dawson. He was, as it happened, about to climb the stairs when he heard Janet Wilson's shriek, turned, and looked through the glass panel of the door at a scene from Hell. The girl, wild-eyed, hair streaming out behind her, was racing down his path; close behind followed leaping, springing, grey-white devils. His astonished eye saw the claws on their outstretched forelimbs, the twin projections on the lower part of their faces, and the tiny red eyes glinting in the light from the house windows.

It was an astonishing, a horrifying sight to be confronted with in one's own home; but Mr Dawson found it in himself to overcome his paralysis. Ever since the Thwaites' deaths, he had kept a loaded shotgun beside the door. He seized it now, threw open the door and let the half-conscious girl fall inside, and fired both barrels at the leading creature. He did not aim: but at that range he had no need to. The weird pursuer fell back among its fellows with half its head blown off, and Mr Dawson slammed the door shut.

Mrs Dawson emerged from the kitchen entrance, hands to mouth. The scene before her was nightmarish in its strangeness. The girl was on hands and knees at the foot of the stairs, sobbing for breath. Mr Dawson stood facing the front door, reloading with frantic haste. Grey smoke swirled around him. Spent cartridges tinkled on the floor. It was a tableau that gave rise to only one interpretation, and Mrs Dawson has never quite forgiven herself for the suspicion that instantly filled her mind.

But her husband was not acting like a murderer. He faced the door with gun at the ready, and without turning his head issued instructions in a decisive, crisp voice that Mrs Dawson had never heard him use before. She hurried obediently to take the girl into the front room, to swing closed the wooden shutters, to lift the phone. Janet Wilson, recovering her voice, told her enough to

enable her to realize the horrors that prowled outside. She dialled 999 with a shaking hand.

The gun was fired once more in the hallway, and Mr Dawson joined them in the room, slamming the door behind him. There came the ominous sound of scraping claws on the other side.

The Thwaites' house had been modern, with many large windows. The hermit's hut was flimsy and vulnerable. Mr Dawson's house, however, was ideally constructed to withstand the attack. They heard more glass breaking, and furniture going over, but inside the room, they were safe for a time. They clung together and waited for the police to arrive.

Meanwhile, the other residents of that quiet village street, roused by the sound of the shotgun blasts, had seen from their windows some of what was taking place. Those who had a phone rang the police; the others watched the horde that milled at the Dawsons' door and windows, and prayed that their house would not become the next target.

It is not certain just who it was that rang Askwith, the owner of Grange Farm. Whoever it was knew that Askwith owned a crop-burner, and the suggestion that the farmer fetch it was inspired.

This implement (which Askwith hired out to owners of large gardens and to other farmers) is nothing more than a flame-thrower, similar to those used in the last war. It is normally used to clear large areas of weeds or to destroy diseased crops.

There were three of the creatures in the road outside the Dawsons' front gate. The watchers had seen them feast on their fallen comrade, and had known with sudden revulsion how the circular holes in the bodies found in the Thwaites' house had been caused. The whitish heads had no discernible mouths, but the twin projections served as teeth and were evidently hollow.

Askwith's truck came slowly down the road and stopped. Peter Askwith, the farmer's eldest son, stood in the back with the flame-thrower ready.

The three feeding Terrors looked up as the truck stopped, and moved towards it, uncertainly, as though made uncomfortable by the headlamps' bright light. They progressed in jumps rather in the manner of a flea hopping. Their hind limbs resembled those of a frog, and looked immensely strong. The two tusks through which

they had ingested their dead companion's blood were wet with the recent feast.

The onlookers did not have long to study them. Young Askwith, his foot braced on the tailboard, pulled the trigger of the flame-thrower, and a stream of liquid fire arched over to the drooling, hopping things in the road.

Even as they fell to the ground, with their hides peeling and splitting under that awful heat, they made no sound. The farmer's son kept the flame on the motionless bodies for a few moments, then turned the weapon off. The street lights appeared dim after that searing flame. An atrocious stench rose from the charred objects on the roadway.

It was at this point that the police arrived, two carloads of armed men. They spread out and advanced on the Dawsons' house. It is unnecessary to detail how the creatures were destroyed, hunted down and shot one by one in the house, and at last in the gardens as they fled and hopped from the quick bullets.

The carcasses – there were thirty-four – were piled up on the pavement against the garden wall of the house they had invaded. They were to be collected in the morning and taken to Nottingham University for detailed examination, the police said. But as the dawn brightened in the sky next day, the two constables posted to guard them watched helpless as they disintegrated before their eyes. A reaction to the ultraviolet? It seems likely, but there is much that is unknown about these strange beings.

They have, it is true, been traced to the disused coalmine, Johnson's Pit. The openings around old Tom Brennan's lifthouse have been dynamited and sealed. It is probable that the heavy rain and melting snows of that year had driven them up from their subterranean lair, as they had emerged once before in 1703, to terrify the inhabitants of Scanham. The bodies they left then, drained of blood and marked by these round wounds, had given rise to the name 'The Scanham Sickness'. The press have chosen to call their most recent visitation 'The Scanham Terror'.

No one, as far as can be found, has furnished a satisfactory explanation of what prey they lived on in the dark underground world they came from. It may be that there are other, less predatory, creatures down there. But it is unlikely that we shall ever know, and it would be foolish to speculate without further information.

Fay Woolf

Slowly

The accident occurred at just before twelve-thirty that hot, dusty afternoon in July; but by the time the first doctors reached him, little Darren had already endured some thirty minutes of unbelievable agony.

There was no shortage of eye witnesses to describe to the medical men the background to the boy's mishap. He had been alone in the front car of the Big Dipper Train as it dipped and whirled and swooped in solitary splendour along the rails, tracing the crazy switchback pattern of this monstrous edifice overshadowing the Happyland Funfair. And just like it had done a thousand times before, the train swerved wildly round the topmost hairpin bend, leaping and bucking for all the world like some great steel animal gone berserk; but somewhere, somehow, amidst the conglomeration of sophisticated machinery that motivated the train along and around this vast metal framework, some obscure cog missed its notch.

That single infinitesimal stutter, that one lost link, was enough. More than enough. The huge weight of the metal cars and their passengers, allied to the momentum engendered by the train's savage speed, was a combination that the laws of gravity could hardly gainsay. In a welter of thunderous sound, the four interlocked carriages careered at some fifty miles an hour into the foot-thick steel post at the bottom of the first decline. Horrified witnesses gazed helplessly, as bodies were flung like rag dolls atop and across the rails and superstructure, or far out into space, to plummet on to the hard cold concrete way below; and as if in concert, the screeching, grinding cacophony of metal grating on metal, and the desperate anguished cries of the injured and the dying.

In terms of statistics, the situation was only too tragically clear: of the original twelve occupants of the carriage cars, three had been killed instantaneously, three more had died within moments of the

horrendous impact, and a further three had been virtually rent limb from limb by the sharp-edged girders that surrounded the guard-rails. To survive such injuries would have been rather more than the manifestation of a miracle.

Two people – a boy and a girl, aged eight and nine respectively – did survive. They had been in the back car with their father, who had seen in that one split scintilla of time that the front carriage was out of control and ordered the children to crouch down at his feet and curl themselves into a ball, so that when the train hit the girder, there was at least a chance that . . .

The man died. His children escaped with countless bruises. It was just short of unbelievable, and the only bright spot in an incident which, even in the confusion and prevailing horror, had yet to enact its grisly aftermath. For beneath the tangle of twisted steel at the foot of the man-made slope, little Darren Martindale lay trapped.

He had lain there now for some two hours: a helpless little boy of six, his red-gold hair stained a deeper shade of scarlet, his colourless face barely visible beneath the wreckage. The flock of doctors and nurses had eased his agony as much as they were able, which was in truth less than adequate. By dint of careful positioning and climbing, the slimmest of the nurses had managed to squeeze into an aperture slightly wider than the body of a child, from which point of vantage she could at least inject him with morphine. Beyond that, it was more a case of waiting for the crane and lifting apparatus to arrive than of dependence on medical ministrations: for closer examination of Darren's plight had revealed that both his legs and arms were caught beneath the crushing poundage of the weirdly-woven shards of metal; and any amateurish efforts of well-meaning onlookers to hoist the decimated trolley car away from the tiny body could well have resulted in even more carnage.

But the machinery necessary for the boy's deliverance had perforce to come some considerable distance. The red tape part of the operation had been slashed to the bone; yet it was turned two-thirty when the rigging was finally set into place, and Chief Engineer Calhoun had inched his bulky frame into the lowest reaches of the diced remnants of metal. It was his job to guide the men who operated the crane and the rest of the lifting gear, to channel their efforts into a minute area where one false set of

movements could turn the whole episode into yet another feast of death.

Not, he decided as he gazed in at the still form of Darren, not that there was any real chance of anything other than death. His lips set hard: he was not a squeamish man, and indeed, by the very nature of his job, he had witnessed sights to turn the stomach of the most determined exponents of sangfroid; but what he could see in the heart of this mountainous steel mass was enough to sicken him, almost physically so. With a pronounced effort, he managed to contain himself: the bile that had risen unbidden to his throat sank back again into his stomach, and he grimaced at its bitter taste, the taste of fright, the taste of fear.

For little Darren Martindale was slowly, infinitesimally, losing his limbs. Spreadeagled as he was, like the sufferer in a latter-day crucifixion, the dead weight of the metal lay across his upper biceps, and across the femurs, the big bones of his undeveloped thighs. Millimetre by millimetre, as inexorable as time itself, the sharp edges of the fractured lengths of steel were biting into the boy's flesh. From where he maintained his precarious balance, Calhoun could clearly make out the incisions which before his very eyes seemed even now to be widening, widening . . .

Calhoun bared his teeth in his mental anguish: there was nothing he or anyone else could do for the child, and yet merely to stand around and wait for the end. . . 'Steady!' he called to the crane operator. 'Steeaaadyyy . . .' The gigantic hook latched on to the upper section of the shambles that had once been a Kiddie's Pleasure Ride. The structure shivered and rocked under the added weight, and briefly he allowed his eyes to rest again on the boy's face. But Darren was still unconscious, though whether this was induced by the narcotics already administered or by the shock of impact, it was hard to tell. And, Calhoun reminded himself, probably academic anyway . . . 'Lift!' he yelled. 'Lift—!' The great arm of the crane took the strain of the weight. 'Gently!' Calhoun screamed. Slowly, the crane hoisted its first load, a section of the trolley car in which Darren had sat, a jolly, laughing boy, eager to taste the thrills of the Dipper, so that he could brag to his school-pals.

Calhoun choked back a sob. 'Easy now,' he called. 'Take it eeeassyyy . . .' His sharp eyes caught a sudden movement and he

waved the machinery to a standstill, and crouched down further on the platform of twisted rail and unrecognizable metal. His practised gaze brought home to him the confirmation of what he already knew anyway: that if the machinery moved the wreckage again, the whole heap would collapse and the boy would die anyway, which might in the circumstances be a good thing, Calhoun reflected. He squatted there for long seconds, whilst his men watched him from the crane, awaiting his decision, whilst the crowds milling round at the foot of the Big Dipper remained quiet, stunned by the suddenness of the accident, appalled by its deadly result.

The engineer spoke at last. 'Don't move till I give the word, and then shift it an inch at a time, and I *mean* an inch.' He hesitated. 'I'm going in. I'm going to try and get beneath him . . .' He was already shifting forward as he spoke, and the other men knew better than to dissuade him. Calhoun, they reasoned, always knew what he was doing.

Calhoun, if asked his opinion of the men's trust in him, might have expressed other views; and he wondered about his own mental state, in deliberately crawling beneath the huge cone of delicately balanced and eminently lethal steel . . . And by the time he had thought these thoughts, he was already there, balanced on a block of iron that jutted insanely across the girders directly beneath the broken cars. From here, he could see directly into the centre of the cat's-cradle of meshed metal: and he could see the boy, and the carnage that had been wrought.

The steel had dug deeper and deeper into the whitening flesh. In the thighs, the tougher muscle had temporarily resisted the pressure; but the boy's upper arms were not built to withstand any such weight of crushing metal, which had now penetrated to the bone. Something splashed redly into Calhoun's left eye, trickled down his cheek and dripped from the corner of his mouth to drop into space. He did not move; nor did he dare to wipe the gore from his face. Tentatively he dropped his gaze to the ground, to where the boy's life-blood had formed a gruesome puddle on the concrete. He swallowed, his throat struggling to find words.

'Gently . . .' he croaked. There was no movement from up above: how could they hear such a whisper of sound? He gritted his teeth, forced spittle into his mouth. 'Now,' he gritted. Now—' This time

they heard him, and the bulky crane-hook drifted down and fastened again around the uppermost layer of steel, as more blood leaked on to Calhoun's face and hair. 'Geeennnnntly ...' Fractionally, the crane did its work: another strata of metal shaved off the top of the heap: but Calhoun's eyes were fixed on the boy's arms and legs.

The metal had continued its progress in line with the laws of gravity, bearing down with all its savage poundage on to Darren's bloodied limbs. The serrated edges of steel had bitten more than halfway into the flesh and bone and tissue, had eaten through the immature muscle to move faster now and faster with the speed of its own bulk. Paralysed with some nameless dread, Calhoun could not tear his eyes away, as the awesome metal sheared into the limbs and through them and out on to the supporting rail beneath.

And still he did not move, could not move, as the boy's arms and legs, almost simultaneously, dropped lazily to the rails and rolled off the sides and on to Calhoun before plunging to the ground. He crouched there, his body rigid with shock, his eyes still on the lifeless torso scant inches above his head. And very suddenly, Chief Engineer Calhoun began to scream.

Alex White

Cynthia and Charles

She looked at him with profound misgiving, while her hostess fluttered round the ugly over-ornamented drawing room, straightening the knick knacks, and talking volubly.

Cynthia wished that she hadn't accepted the invitation, but when she had first been asked to spend a month with Mrs Casterton, it had seemed an excellent idea; almost an answer to a prayer. Now she was scared.

It wasn't that there was anything obviously wrong with him, in fact in his way he was not bad looking. He was tall and thin, with thick, curly brown hair, dark heavily-marked eyebrows, brown eyes set close together, a beautiful nose, and thin lips. He was nervous and apologetic in manner, and yet Cynthia sensed an arrogance behind the mask which passed for his usual facial expression, and a violence of suppressed emotion which unnerved and dismayed her. His name was Charles, and he was Mrs Casterton's nephew.

His relationship with his Aunt was curious, too. They seemed to understand each other perfectly, but there was something incestuous in their love for one another. When they met, even after a short absence, they kissed on the lips, and yet the age difference was enormous. She must be in her late seventies, and he in his early thirties. Mrs Casterton obviously felt maternal and protective towards him, as well as sexually attracted, and he depended on her completely for companionship. And behind these overt feelings, Cynthia sensed a hidden but shared excitement. Mrs Casterton went out frequently, being social and frivolous. He had no friends at all.

Cynthia hadn't met Charles before she came to stay in London. If she had, she felt sure she would never have agreed to stay for so long.

She had come to town because her life in the country had suddenly become insupportable. Ian had recently left her for her best

friend (a corny enough situation, but a traumatic one for Cynthia). Sadly she was still in love with him, and since she and Ian had had no children, (fortunately probably, although until now she had regretted it passionately), she had suddenly found herself alone in a small cottage in Essex, with no near neighbours and, because she had made her life entirely round Ian, no real friends either. After a few weeks of solitude she had decided to try to find a job in London but, on discovering the price of rented accommodation, had nearly abandoned the idea when she had met Mrs Casterton at a local cocktail party and, having for some reason told her all her troubles, had accepted her offer to rent a room in her flat near Victoria, as a temporary measure.

She had now spent five days in the flat, and had disliked every minute of them. The place was cramped and depressing, and she had found no work. To add to it all, Mrs Casterton had said casually a few minutes ago, 'I'm afraid, my dear that you and Charles will have to get along together on your own for the next three weeks. My sister is ill, and the woman who acts as her nurse says that unless she is allowed an immediate holiday, she will not be able to continue in the job, so I shall have to go to Northumberland to relieve her.'

At this Charles had given Cynthia an odd and rather chilling sidelong glance and she, after murmuring polite regrets about the sister's illness, had told Mrs Casterton brightly, that she was sure that she and Charles would manage splendidly. Her heart sank, however, because though Charles worked at an office all day, she would be forced to be alone in his company every evening when she hadn't made another date, not to mention the fact that they would be sleeping under the same roof, alone. She knew that she held absolutely no attraction for him, luckily, but his nocturnal habits worried her to say the least. Every night he left the house for two or three hours at a stretch, between two and half past. She heard him creeping stealthily along the creaking wooden floor boards, heard the front door squeak as it opened, and then woke, always with a feeling of apprehension, when he put the key in the lock, on his return.

What did he do for those few hours? Why did he and Mrs Casterton never refer to it? The lack of explanation made Cynthia feel certain that he couldn't be working at a night club or anything

ordinary, or they would have told her about it, so what did he do ?

And why had he no friends ? It was weird ! Did others find him as scary as she did ? And why was she scared of him, anyway ? What was the special characteristic which frightened her so ? Sometimes she imagined that his face had a green pallor, which gave it an almost fluorescent aura. Could it be true ? Did anyone else notice it ? Did his constantly restless hands, his sudden silences punctuated by equally sudden secret and wolfish smiles, depress others, as well as herself ? Yet there was not the least doubt of Mrs Casterton's affection, she doted on him. Charles had certainly found love there.

Mrs Casterton was making plans for her departure, so Cynthia arranged as many evening dates as she could for the period of Mrs Casterton's absence. She checked the lock of her bedroom, had a bolt added, and arranged surreptitiously for a telephone extension, which the Post Office installed with most untypical speed. She could do no more, and even these precautions she found slightly ridiculous, when she managed to think of the situation calmly. She also tried desperately hard to find alternative accommodation at a price she could afford, but in this she was unsuccessful.

Mrs Casterton left for Northumberland on a Tuesday, and so as not to appear to be rude to Charles, Cynthia planned to spend the first evening with him at the flat.

Cynthia had been surprised that Mrs Casterton hadn't protested at Cynthia's installation of the new telephone, but in fact she had seemed delighted, because apparently she intended to go on taking in lodgers in Cynthia's room after Cynthia left.

The evening alone with Charles was far more enjoyable than she had feared. Charles, though he spoke little, showed that he had a surprisingly good sense of humour, and the television in the living room acted as a chaperone to them. They had cooked a passable meal together and Charles had helped with the washing-up, so by the time Cynthia went to bed, she was somewhat reassured. She locked and bolted her door, rang her only brother in Scotland, on the new telephone, read a chapter or two of a novel, and lay down to sleep. She half woke at two-thirty to hear Charles leaving the flat, and half woke again on his return. By the time she got up and went to have her bath in the morning, he had left for his office, and she was feeling refreshed and enormously relieved.

She went job hunting during the day, but found nothing. She also looked over a flat, but it was unsuitable. She went to the theatre with a girl friend in the evening, had a snack with her at her home afterwards, and reached Mrs Casterton's very late; so late indeed, that she was just in time to see Charles coming out of the front door of the block of flats for his nightly prowling.

Some instinct made her shrink back into a dark and nearby doorway, from where she watched him as he looked carefully up and down the street. In spite of the fact that the night was fine, he was wearing a coat with the collar turned up and a felt hat, pulled well down, shading his face.

There was something furtive about his movements as he walked with long, bouncing strides immediately towards her. He was looking straight ahead and his face was sweating. He was breathing heavily and seemed pleased and excited; more animated, in fact, than she had ever seen him.

She shivered involuntarily as he passed, waited until he had turned a corner and was out of sight, took off her shoes so that her footsteps wouldn't echo on the pavement, then ran to the flat.

When she reached her room and had locked and bolted her door, she lay on her bed with her heart pounding and an agonizing pain which seemed to be a constriction on her chest. She lay awake until his return at five o'clock, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

The next day she decided to have lunch at a cheap and cheerful little Italian restaurant, and because she always felt embarrassed eating alone in public, she bought the local paper on the way. She had a sense of shock and also strangely of recognition, when she saw that during the night a young girl in the district had been raped and then brutally murdered. The girl had, it seemed, been battered to death after putting up a gallant struggle. The incident had taken place near the council flats not far from Mrs Casterton's flat. Cynthia was utterly certain in her own mind that Charles was the murderer, though why, she didn't know.

She still had nineteen more days to go as Mrs Casterton's lodger and since she had paid for the month in advance, it would perhaps arouse Charles's hostility and suspicion if she left early without being able to give him a forwarding address. Besides her feeling that he was a murderer was only an instinct and quite liable to be wrong. Anyway, perhaps it was even wiser to stay. Where she had

lived in Essex, even the most rabid gypsy-hater believed that the gypsies on one's own common never harmed the surrounding people. They only caused trouble for those living further away. Perhaps it was the same with murderers!

What should she do? Childishly she decided to spin a coin. Heads she would stay, tails she would go. The coin came down head upwards. Well, she would stay for the moment, and intensify her efforts to find somewhere else to live; preferably not in the same part of Victoria! Should she go to the police, however, and voice her suspicions? But what had she to offer in the way of evidence? Nothing at all, simply an instinctive dislike for an apparently harmless young man, and the coincidence that he had been out of the flat at the same time that the girl had been killed. Better wait and see for a little while. How depressing and frightening it all was!

Her hunt for a new flat that afternoon was as abortive as usual but she did receive some hope of a job which could suit her. A dentist in the district needed a receptionist and she was able to make an appointment to see him for the next morning, at nine-thirty. Her interview went well, she got the job, and was asked to start the following Monday. So far so good.

She went out on all the next few evenings, but both she and Charles were at home on the Sunday. Charles seemed in a good mood, and for once he seemed inclined to talk. He had, it appeared, been a Barnardo's child, and had nothing but praise for the institution, the staff, and the life he had lived there. His mother had abandoned him when she had left his father (who was a drunk), and went to live with an even more unsavoury character. She was a slut and a tart, said Charles, and he was well rid of her. She was still alive. He knew where she was, but made no attempt to see her. The last time he had set eyes on her, she was enormously fat, with a face bloated from drink, and she still behaved like a tart. When Charles spoke of her, Cynthia could hear the hatred in his voice and he physically shook with emotion.

Mrs Casterton was no relation after all. When Charles had come up to London looking for a job, twelve years ago at the age of eighteen, her husband had just died and she was letting rooms. He had taken one and had been there ever since. Mrs Casterton hadn't liked her husband who, surprisingly, in view of her decision to become a boarding-house keeper, had left her comparatively well

off. Charles and Mrs Casterton had become friends immediately and she had evidently become a surrogate mother and his own personal, idiosyncratic, ideal of womanhood. When Cynthia at this point asked him if he ever wanted to get married, an expression of such violent disgust crossed his face that she tried to drop the subject, but he volunteered the fact that the idea of either marriage or sex revolted him. He was entirely happy as he was, he said. Entirely. And for a moment his eyes gleamed. He then changed the subject firmly and began asking Cynthia questions about herself. What sort of a family had she had? Were they still living? What kind of a background did she come from? Had she enjoyed her childhood? At what age had she married? How long had they been engaged? Had she had pre-marital sex? To this last question Cynthia had made no reply and had turned on the television, and though he repeated the question several times, she refused to answer, telling him that she found the question offensive.

That night when she went to bed, she was unable to read. She simply lay awake, with her door locked and bolted, and waited for him to go out of the house.

The flat was on the third floor of a jerry-built modern block. There was no living-in porter, but a man came daily to do odd jobs and a cleaning woman of sorts, who was supplied by the landlords for the common parts, 'did' for some of the tenants, including Mrs Casterton, who employed her twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays.

The plan of the flat was as follows. At the furthest end of the corridor from the front door, and taking up the entire width of the flat, was the living room, which had small steel-framed windows overlooking a reasonably pretty treelined street, and some run-down early Victorian houses. It was the largest room in the place, and though it was light, it had heavy Edwardian furniture and dark brown curtains, which made it seem gloomy. On the right, going towards the door, was Mrs Casterton's bedroom and although it, too, was largish, it was almost entirely taken up by an enormous wooden bed and dark oak furniture. Charles's bedroom was opposite this. It was smaller and narrow and when he drew the heavy red curtains back, which was seldom, and left the door open, Cynthia saw that it was kept meticulously neat but had almost no personality at all except for one extraordinary feature – the glass

in his window was thick and ribbed, and tinted green. The only bathroom was next to Mrs Casterton's room, and the kitchen was opposite it. The only lavatory was beside the bathroom, and opposite the lavatory, the corridor turned sharply to make a small hall, by the entrance door. Beside this, and again running the entire breadth of the flat was Cynthia's bedroom, but it, like Charles's, was very narrow and its window, which was in the side wall, overlooked a deep well which was the courtyard of the empty house next door.

On this particular night Charles added a worrying variation to his nightly routine. She heard his footsteps coming towards her room as usual (since her bedroom was so near to the front door), but on this occasion the footsteps halted, and then to her horror she saw that he was trying her door handle. She watched mesmerized as the knob turned, then she heard him pressing against the door with his body, and when the door didn't give, she heard him throw himself against it as softly as he could, but unmistakably. He paused, there was a short silence, then a slight clicking sound and the key fell out of the lock and on to the floor on her side of the room. She rapidly got out of bed as the little flap over the key hole fell into place, then watched fascinated as this was gently pushed aside. She felt rather than heard him bend down to look in through the key hole and imagined an eye staring into the room.

She had never tried to look through the key hole herself, but at a guess he wouldn't be able to see the bed, which was along the wall, and he certainly couldn't see her, where she was standing now. His only view, she thought, would be of the empty fireplace, part of her dressing table to the right of it, and part of the card table, which she used as a writing desk, to the left.

She waited, rigid and breathless, for what seemed like several minutes, then the key flap was allowed to fall into position again. After a few moments she heard him make for the front door, open it, and then shut it. Again she stayed where she was for some time, until she had satisfied herself that he had indeed gone out, after which she looked at her clock to see if it was too late to telephone her brother, or a friend. She decided unhappily that it was.

On the way to work next day she bought the local paper and, though not surprised, was terrified and revolted to see that another wretched girl had been raped and then battered to death. She

arrived at the dentist's feeling shaken and ill, but found it impossible to tell her new employer what was the matter and resolved to spend her lunch hour at the nearest police station.

Fortunately her job fully engaged her concentration for the next couple of hours and she was pleased to find the work congenial. Another dentist working at the same address had a young, friendly, and pretty receptionist who asked her to join her for lunch.

'How very kind,' said Cynthia. 'Tomorrow I'd love it. Today I have something I must do.'

The girl looked disappointed. 'It gets a bit lonely eating on my own,' she said, 'and tomorrow is my half day, so I'll be going home for lunch.'

'I wish I could come,' said Cynthia, 'but I really can't. Let's take a rain check.'

'A rain check?'

'That means we eat together when we can both manage it,' said Cynthia.

For some reason this made the girl angry, and she replied sulkily, 'OK. If that's the way you want it.'

Cynthia, seeing that she had upset her and naturally not wanting to make enemies on her first day in a new job, tried to coax her out of her ill humour, but when she found the girl refused to understand, capitulated good-temperedly, and said, 'All right then. Let's eat together today, and my other date can go hang.'

Immediately the girl brightened. 'Really?' she asked eagerly.

'Really,' answered Cynthia.

Lunch passed off pleasantly enough, though Cynthia was worried all the time about going to see the police. When work was over, however, the girl, who seemed to have taken a great fancy to Cynthia, said, 'Where do you live? Can I walk you home?'

'I have to go to the nearest police station,' replied Cynthia.

'Whatever for?' asked the girl.

'I have something to report,' replied Cynthia.

'Car stolen or something?'

'That's it,' agreed Cynthia, thankfully accepting the excuse. 'A bore, isn't it?'

'I'll come with you.'

'Please don't bother.'

'I'd like to.'

Cynthia began to feel harassed. 'Look,' she said, 'it's a slightly complicated matter, so I'd rather deal with it on my own, if you don't mind.'

The girl stared at her strangely and with a certain dislike, then said, 'Not at all. You go right ahead, I can see you have your secrets. Well, don't bother. I have mine.'

'It's not exactly a secret,' said Cynthia. 'It is only something a bit private.'

'Natch,' replied the girl briefly and she walked away.

The police listened politely to what Cynthia had to say, though she wasn't sure if they believed her. However the detective sergeant said he thought he'd better take her back home and make some inquiries, and told her that he'd just report what he was up to, if she wouldn't mind waiting for a minute or two.

'Oh, for God's sake don't come home with me!' exclaimed Cynthia. 'Charles might think I'd been talking to you about him, and that might be dangerous!'

'He won't,' replied the Sergeant. 'One moment, Madam. I won't be a jiffy, and we'll tell this young man that we are making routine inquiries in the district.'

To her surprise, Charles seemed delighted to see the detective sergeant and the detective constable and seemed eager to answer all their questions. He willingly agreed that he went out at nights, and explained that he suffered from claustrophobia, and the only way he could get through a job, shut up all day in an office, was to roam freely in the uncrowded streets at night. He said he needed very little sleep, but he did need exercise. He said that he had lodged with Mrs Casterton for twelve years, and that she would corroborate all he had said. He gave them her telephone number in Northumberland, and said he quite understood that the inquiries were routine, though he added rather severely that the police had their duty to do in cases like this, and since there had been several murders which had gone undetected in the district in recent years, the more inquiries the police made of everyone round about, the better. He said no they hadn't troubled him at all and that he was only too pleased to be of the slightest assistance. He said that in future he would keep his eyes wide open on his rambles, and report any irregularities he saw. What sort of a man were they looking

for? he asked, and when they replied that as yet they had no lead, he seemed genuinely disappointed.

Cynthia had never seen Charles so charming, and she suddenly felt ashamed of her suspicions. After all he did go out walking every single night, so it wasn't surprising that he had been out on the nights of the murders, and though his behaviour in trying her door the previous night had been upsetting and unpleasant, it did betoken perhaps simply a normal wish for sex. Proximity bred desire, and perhaps normality should have been reassuring. Added to which he had no other friends.

After the police left, Charles seemed in high spirits. 'Well, Well!' he exclaimed. 'What a turn up! Not much happens in our lives here, does it? Nice chaps they seemed, both of them. Horrible thing these murders! Have you seen anything about them in the papers? Terrible they are, and rather worrying you know, to think that when I've been pounding round on my beat, this lunatic has been at large, doing these monstrous things. Not very nice to think about, eh? And something else is beginning to bother me, too.'

'What's that?'

'The murders seem to have been getting more frequent just lately. Two in the last few weeks.'

'Have they been going on long, then?' asked Cynthia.

'Certainly.'

'When did they start?'

'About five or six years ago. The first one wasn't followed, though, for about eighteen months. Then there was a third about a year later, and now two in about a month. It looks as if the killer is becoming a damned sight too confident.'

'Yes.'

'You came in with those policemen,' said Charles. 'How did you come across them?'

Cynthia could feel herself flushing, but she replied coolly, 'I found them on the stairs and they asked if there were any men living where I lived, so I had to say yes.'

'Of course.' Charles gave her one of his sudden smiles, then said cheerfully, 'Well, let's see what there is to eat shall we? That is unless you are going out.'

'I'm afraid I am,' said Cynthia.

'I thought today was your first day at work?' said Charles.

'It was,' replied Cynthia.

'Not too tired to go out?' asked Charles.

Cynthia laughed a slightly forced laugh. 'Not after only one day,' she replied.

'Celebrating the job?'

'In a way.'

'You have a lot of friends.'

'A few.'

'You must have a very trusting nature,' said Charles. 'You need to trust friends.'

'Yes, I suppose you do.'

'And you're a very attractive woman.'

Cynthia was surprised at this, but she only murmured, 'Thank you, but the friends I go out with are mostly women.'

'Some men?'

'Occasionally.'

'A boy friend?'

'No. I still feel a bit raw about my marriage break up.'

'How did your best friend get to know your husband so well?' asked Charles.

'He commuted to London every day and she lives in London.'

'Leaving you on your own.'

'Yes.'

'Not very sensible.'

'I got lonely.'

'That's what I meant.'

'I didn't find someone else, if that's what you're getting at.' Cynthia felt herself becoming a little annoyed.

Charles gave her a long look, then said, 'So none of it was your fault?'

'There are always two sides so they tell me,' answered Cynthia, ruefully. 'I suppose I should have seen what was happening sooner, but I didn't, which was silly of me, and my girl friend is beautiful and rather predatory.'

'Predatory.' Charles mullied the word over. 'I don't like predatory women,' he said.

'Nor do I,' agreed Cynthia, grimly.

'Nor predatory girls.'

'Quite.'

'You aren't predatory?'

'No.'

'You never have been?'

'I don't think so.'

He stared at her, then said slowly, 'Do you like sex?'

'Of course,' said Cynthia.

'Of course?'

'Well I'm still young, and it's natural to like sex.'

She saw him clench his hands. 'Are you saying that I'm unnatural?' he asked.

'Certainly not.'

'But I told you the other day that I don't like sex.'

'Yes.'

'And you have just said that it is natural to like it.'

'It is.'

'Which makes me unnatural.'

'Unusual rather than unnatural.'

The knuckles on his hands were white. 'Unnatural,' repeated Charles. 'You shouldn't say things like that, you know. It isn't kind.'

'I certainly didn't mean to be unkind,' protested Cynthia. 'Why should I? You're making a mountain out of a molehill, Charles. I wasn't even thinking of you when I made my remark!'

Charles sneered. 'Why should a pretty girl think about someone like me?' he asked.

'Why shouldn't she?' retorted Cynthia. 'You're quite nice looking, you're young, hard working, intelligent. Quite a catch, Charlie.'

Charles leaned forward and put up his hand in a curious, theatrical gesture, saying intensely, 'Intelligent! It's interesting that you should call me intelligent. Why don't you say clever?'

'Clever, then,' agreed Cynthia, amiably.

'Very clever?' asked Charles.

'I don't know. I don't know your work, do I? But quite probably, I should think.'

'Brilliant?' asked Charles eagerly, flashing his teeth again in his sudden unattractive smile. He looked at her slyly now, and added, 'The people who know me best, believe I'm brilliant.'

'Then I'm sure you are,' said Cynthia. She was beginning to feel

uncomfortable, and she looked at her watch. 'Heavens!' she exclaimed, effusively. 'How the time does fly in your company, Charles! I must change, or I'll be late.'

'For your date tonight?'

'Yes.'

'With a girl friend?'

'Actually it's a man tonight, and he's coming to call for me here.'

'A man,' said Charles, thoughtfully.

'A man,' repeated Cynthia, a little impatiently.

'Coming here to call for you?'

'I told you.'

'Young?'

'Older than me.'

'Handsome?'

'I suppose so, in a way. He's a dish, really, in his fashion.' She spoke lightly.

'A dish!' Charles made a face. 'Will he kiss you when he brings you home?'

'How do I know?'

'Will you let him sleep with you?'

Cynthia got to her feet, angrily. 'You are being impertinent again,' she said tersely, and went quickly out of the room, but not before she had seen Charles's face. He was looking at her with an expression of such concentrated loathing that she felt faint, and after she had changed and made up, she remained in her room until she heard Adam, her boy friend, ring the front door bell, then she opened the door at once, and almost fell into his arms.

'Hey. Hey!' exclaimed Adam, in amazement. 'What on earth is the matter?'

'Quick!' answered Cynthia, urgently, 'Let's get away from here. I don't think I can stand much more!'

'Of what?'

'I'll tell you when we've left this place,' replied Cynthia. 'Come on!'

Adam put his arm round her. 'You're shaking!' he said, astonished.

'Come on!' urged Cynthia, a second time.

Just before they went down the road, Cynthia saw the kitchen curtains move, and with a pang of horror she saw Charles's face

pressed against the window pane, but this time there was no expression on it at all.

Cynthia and Adam had a good evening together. She hadn't met him all that often, so although she told him that she considered Charles was a nut case, and horrible to share a flat with on her own, she didn't go so far as to tell him her suspicions that Charles was actually a murderer. She told him that Charles had tried to get into her room the night before, however, and that she was looking for somewhere else to live as hard as she could. After suggesting that if she could shack up with Charles, she could easily come straight home and shack up with him, Adam said seriously, 'Well there's no doubt you'll have to leave that place, and tomorrow at the latest, honey. You were in one hell of a state when we met tonight, and even if the chap is only a bit rum, it's obvious that you and he must part at once, or he'll send you into a nervous decline.'

'I can't afford it, but I'll try for a small hotel if I can't find a flat or digs,' replied Cynthia.

'That's my girl.'

'What shall I give as an excuse for leaving Mrs Casterton's?' asked Cynthia. 'Charles won't like it.'

'Make me the excuse,' replied Adam. 'Say we're engaged and that I don't like the idea of you living alone in a flat with another man. Say you'll probably return when Mrs Casterton gets back.'

'OK,' said Cynthia. 'Thanks.'

'And if it comes to that,' said Adam, 'Why don't we get engaged? I'm serious, my love. I know I'm sold on you, and I hate it that someone like you should be trying to cope with the big wide world on her own.'

'I can manage, thanks,' replied Cynthia. 'I like you very much, and I don't in the least mind pretending we're engaged under the circumstances; in fact, I think it's sweet of you to suggest it, but I haven't got over Ian quite yet, so please don't talk about marriage. Don't get upset and please stick around, because I'm not stringing you along, I swear it, but this Ian thing really did knock the hell out of me, and I have to recover a bit, and get my bearings.'

'If that's the way you want it,' said Adam.

'It is,' answered Cynthia.

They walked home arm in arm and Cynthia felt happier than she had done at any time since her marriage had broken up.

Adam kissed her at the door of the block of flats, and Cynthia ran up to Mrs Casterton's feeling that life perhaps now really held some form of future.

Neither she nor Adam had seen Charles watching them from across the road and when she reached the door of her room, she found a note from Charles propped against it. His handwriting was sprawling and looked uneducated, with the downward strokes looping back on themselves.

She tore open the envelope and read,

Dear Cynthia, I rang Mims after you left (Mims was the name he used for Mrs Casterton), to tell her about the visit of those two policemen. Her reaction was that they were quite right to go round making inquiries and that it was not before time, but she said she was going to come straight back here, because she is the head of the household. She'll be with us tomorrow. I told her to stay put, because how would her sister get on without her? But you know Mims. She thinks no one can be without her in a crisis but, as her sister is not in a crisis situation now, she thinks she ought to be protecting us, whatever that means, and especially you, as you are a young and pretty woman. She sends you her love. I hope you've had a good time with your dishy man, and I'm sorry if I've made you cross, but it's not all that fun being totally ignored by the only other person sharing your own flat, especially if she is very attractive, and has a full social life. Charles.

Cynthia read the letter several times and with varying degrees of emotion. She was thankful to know that Mrs Casterton was coming back, and yet her return might make it more difficult to leave the flat. It might look ungrateful, and as though she didn't like Charles, which of course was true, but embarrassing as Mrs Casterton adored him so. She was surprised that Charles had repeated the fact that he found her attractive. It seemed quite out of character and yet it was reassuring that he was so normal. It was also surprising, because apart from being attracted, Charles had made it obvious that he disliked her intensely. Perhaps that might make it more possible for Cynthia to leave. Perhaps Charles would persuade Mrs Casterton to let her go? Anyway on the whole the letter brought good news. Mrs Casterton was coming back, and that could only be an improvement.

Cynthia got undressed and into bed, and was amazed to hear Charles coming into the flat, a few minutes later. It was just after midnight. He was certainly varying his routines these days!

All night, even in her sleep, she half-listened for him to go out again and then return, but to the best of her knowledge he remained indoors. It was very strange! She awoke feeling depressed and exhausted.

Mrs Casterton was already at home by the time Cynthia got back from work the next evening. There was an unpleasant moment when Cynthia (who had given up the habit of knocking on the living room door, while Mrs Casterton was away) surprised them both in a passionate embrace. After a long and uncomfortable pause, Mrs Casterton welcomed Cynthia enthusiastically. She said how happy Charles had been in her company and how nice it was to see Cynthia looking so pretty and well.

The evening was banal but bearable and above all, except for that initial introduction, it was heartwarminglly normal. Mrs Casterton spoke amusingly about her stay with her sister and Charles was so delighted to see her back again, that he too, was quite talkative, and by his lights, also reasonably entertaining. There was a good play on television, which they all watched, then Mrs Casterton made the three of them hot Ovaltine, and Cynthia went to bed, for once, not bothering to lock her door.

Adam telephoned to see if she was still staying there, and Cynthia explained about Mrs Casterton's return. She had heard a click almost as soon as she had picked up her telephone extension, which made her careful in what she said, and Adam appeared to have heard it too, so all was well.

The following morning Mrs Casterton asked her to stay on as long as she liked.

With her job occupying her days, and Adam taking her out most evenings, and with Mrs Casterton now safely reinstalled in the flat, everything seemed so completely and blessedly ordinary, that Cynthia didn't bother to move. She settled into the easy routine of the flat quite happily and her fears about Charles now seemed utterly absurd.

Things went on in this way for nearly three months, then one night over dinner, Adam dropped his bombshell. 'How do you feel

about me now, darling?' he asked seriously. 'I still want to marry you, you know, and I've been offered a good job in Brussels which I very much want to take. I'd like you to come with me. Will you?'

'When will you be going?' asked Cynthia.

'If I accept, in three weeks' time.'

'So soon?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'I'd love to marry you, and the sooner the better,' replied Cynthia, 'but, though this is only a small point, I have to give a month's notice in my job.'

'Your boss would understand.'

'I'm sure he would. He's a nice man, but the girl who helped the other dentist has packed it in and they are desperately short-handed. I'd hate to leave before they could find a replacement. At the moment I'm doing her work as well as mine.'

'The job I'm offering you is a job for life,' said Adam.

'I know, darling and I'm accepting it gratefully. I'm thrilled to bits, but I'm trying to work things out.'

In the end she and Adam planned to marry in Brussels as soon as the decree was made absolute, but Cynthia would go out to Belgium on a visit and stay in separate accommodation, in a month's time. 'I can look for our future home, and if we see a lot of one another, we shall know whether too much of each other bores us,' said Cynthia.

'Thanks very much!' laughed Adam.

'It's as well to be sure,' replied Cynthia gravely. 'Look what happened before.'

'It doesn't frighten me,' said Adam, cheerfully, 'so you needn't think it does!'

'Bless you.' Cynthia was touched.

'How about tonight?' asked Adam.

'What about tonight?'

'Shall we try out whether we suit each other in bed?'

'It would be marvellous!' said Cynthia, 'I hope to God Charles doesn't find out, though. He is totally nutty about sex, as I told you and it's frightening. He'll know if we've been to bed like radar, and he goes right out of his mind, if he thinks people are "sinning", as he calls it. Something to do with his mother being a tart, he says, but he's really scary. Really nuts.'

'Well then, thank heavens Mrs Casterton is back!' exclaimed Adam, 'If he'd go nuts about you and me sinning, he's certainly a case!'

'Right,' agreed Cynthia fervently.

'I'll buy you a ring tomorrow by the way,' said Adam, 'Shall we choose it together during the lunch hour?'

'Not tomorrow,' answered Cynthia, 'Let's get one in Brussels. I'm superstitious about getting one before the divorce is finalized!'

Although it was very late by the time she got home, Mrs Casterton and Charles were still up, so Cynthia told them straight away about her engagement. 'I'll be going out to Brussels in a month,' she explained happily, 'and then returning here to sell the cottage in Essex. I also want to get some clothes for the wedding. May I come back to this flat Mrs Casterton?'

'Certainly,' said Mrs Casterton, graciously.

Charles had gone very white, and he was twisting his hands together nervously. 'Will you be living in sin?' he asked intently.

Cynthia shook her head, 'No, of course not,' she said, carefully. 'It might prejudice the divorce.'

'Good,' replied Charles, violently. 'I think it's filthy to live in sin.' His voice was strained and high.

Mrs Casterton spoke soothingly. 'Silly boy! Don't worry so. Cynthia wouldn't do a thing like that! She isn't that sort!'

'I don't know about that,' retorted Charles, spitefully. 'I think she's exactly that sort.'

'Don't take any notice of him, Cynthia, my dear,' smiled Mrs Casterton. 'It's his upbringing. They teach them to be prudish in institutions, you know.'

'My mother was filthy,' said Charles. 'Filthy.'

'Yes, yes, we know that,' smiled Mrs Casterton, 'but Cynthia isn't like your mother.'

'As a matter of fact, she is,' said Charles. 'She is very like my mother was when she was young. Not when I last saw her of course, but when I was little, and when she was young.'

'Now, Charles dear, don't get excited,' said Mrs Casterton firmly. 'I won't have it.'

'I'm not excited. I'm just telling the truth,' said Charles. He turned to Cynthia. 'I thought you were still so in love with that husband of yours,' he said.

'I thought I was, too,' replied Cynthia, 'but it appears things can change, thank God.'

'My mother used to talk like that,' said Charles.

Cynthia's arrangements went ahead smoothly. She left her job at the dentist's. The wedding was fixed for the day after her second return to Brussels. She managed to sell the cottage at a good profit, and quickly, and arranged for all the furniture she needed from it to be sent to Belgium, to the flat they had found there, which had delighted them both from the moment they had seen it. She had found exactly the clothes she wanted for the wedding and also a trousseau for their honeymoon in the South of France.

Everything was perfect, except Charles's behaviour. He was rude to her, was in an exaggeratedly nervous condition which sometimes bordered on hysterics and had developed a facial tic. Mrs Casterton, on the other hand, was serene and a tower of strength. Although she was extra maternal in manner to Charles, she seemed interested in every detail of Cynthia's plans and she insisted that Cynthia should spend her last evening at the flat where she would get a sample of Mrs Casterton's cordon bleu type cooking. 'I'll give you a treat,' she said. 'I'm a first class cook when I set my mind to it, which I'm afraid isn't often, and it will be just the three of us, so it will be nice and cosy.'

Cynthia accepted without much pleasure, though she thought it kind of Mrs Casterton to care.

Eventually her last day in England arrived. All was in order. Tomorrow she would be in Brussels, seeing Adam, and the day after she would be happily married and living in a charming flat with a marvellous man who loved her. Wonderful! How strange life was! This time last year she had been extremely unhappy. Today she was on top of the world. Wonderful, wonderful, out of all reason!

The dinner when it arrived was as superb as Mrs Casterton had promised, and Charles volunteered to do all the washing up afterwards, so Cynthia and Mrs Casterton relaxed comfortably together in the living room. For almost the first time, Cynthia really enjoyed herself in Mrs Casterton's company. Charles was gone a long time, but she was hardly aware of it. Mrs Casterton was in top form and she herself was utterly content. She had had just a little too much to drink which had made her slightly muzzy, but

she hadn't a care in the world. The hired car had been ordered for midday. Everything was packed except her face case and her overnight bag, and her life as Mrs Ian Beaton was finished. Perfect.

She got her first fright when she went to her room to get ready for bed. There was no key in the lock, and the bolt she had put on had been removed. Strange. On the other hand perhaps Mrs Casterton was already getting the place ready for another lodger. She lifted the telephone receiver to ring her brother to say goodbye and got her second fright. The telephone cable, just where it fitted into the plug, had been cut. She ran quickly back to the sitting room to report to Mrs Casterton, but the door was locked. She knocked, then asked to come in, then shouted through the door, but although she could hear Mrs Casterton and Charles laughing and talking, no one opened the door. What on earth was happening? She didn't like it. She'd leave the house. But she couldn't, because the front door had been locked in a way that her key didn't unlock!

Now she began to panic. She ran down the corridor trying all the doors. All were locked including the kitchen and bathroom. She battered on the front door, but it was in a cul-de-sac, and it seemed no one could hear her. What on earth could she do? She ran back to her room, to shout through the window, and found that behind the drawn curtains the window had been boarded up. When had the window been boarded up? And why? What did Mrs Casterton and Charles want with her? They had made her a prisoner, and it was obvious that everything had been thought out carefully. Had Mrs Casterton's dinner party simply been a trap to see that she didn't go out that evening. If so, why?

She sat on her bed, with her brain racing. How could she get out of this? What the hell did they intend to do? Mrs Casterton being in it, too, made it worse.

She didn't feel in the least bit drunk any more; in fact she had never felt more clear-headed, but clear-headed or drunk, how could she escape?

One thing seemed certain. Charles couldn't be going to murder her. Mrs Casterton could never allow that! Perhaps it was all some elaborate practical joke put on for Charles's benefit, because he so hated the thought of sex and marriage? Perhaps they were keeping her a prisoner so that she would be forced to spend her last night

before her marriage 'free from sin', 'unsullied'. Charles's two favourite words.

She suddenly threw herself at the window boarding to see if she could shift it. She couldn't. She began to cry. She was helpless.

One hour passed. Two. Two and a half hours, and the hands of her clock pointed to two-thirty as well. She heard the living room door open on a burst of sound then it shut again and she heard Charles's footsteps coming towards her down the passage. She leapt off the bed, snatched up a heavy china flower jug, and waited behind the door. She would hit Charles on the head with it if he attempted to come in. He didn't. He went to the front door, and she heard it open and shut.

She opened her door cautiously to see if Mrs Casterton would come to her and explain, now that Charles was out, but nothing happened. She lay on her bed again, wondering what on earth to do next, and incredibly fell into a light doze.

She awoke with a start to hear the front door opening once again and the sound of Charles's heavy breathing. Once again she got out of bed and stood behind the door with her flower jug, but Charles evidently had other things than Cynthia to occupy him. She could hear him muttering angrily, but she couldn't hear what he was saying. Was he drunk? Now he was dragging something into the hall, and this time she could hear the words quite clearly. 'Stay there, you bloody bitch while I close the door. Filthy, that's what you are! Filthy! Don't come near me! I loathe and detest people like you. Stay there, against the wall.' She heard him grunt, then close the door. Then she heard something slither against the wall, and then a dull thump. Charles was swearing now and this struck Cynthia as obscene. He never used strong language. It was unnecessary and unpleasant, he said. Well, he was certainly using it now; a positive stream of swear words.

He must have picked up whatever it was he had been carrying, and it must be heavy because he was staggering along the corridor with it, and groaning. He stopped and opened a door . . . his door in all likelihood, then the door slammed, and that was that.

Nothing happened for some time, then she heard the living room door open and, looking through her key hole, she saw Mrs Casterton emerge, then go to Charles's room. He opened his door to her and she went inside then, silence fell again.

Now what? Cynthia's heart was pounding, and her mouth was dry. After what seemed a long time Charles's door was flung open again and Cynthia heard the most appalling scream she had ever heard in her life. On and on it went. On and on, then quite suddenly it stopped.

Blind with terror, Cynthia leapt out of bed, and ran down the corridor to Charles's room. The door was wide open, and what she saw was horrible beyond belief. A naked girl was struggling desperately to free herself from Mrs Casterton's arms, and Charles was laughing and slobbering. He was lunging at the girl with a kitchen knife and stabbing her, and each time the blade went into her flesh, his eyes lit with excitement, and he withdrew it again and waited as the blood began pouring out of the wound before he struck again. The girl was a mass of blood. Her neck had been half severed from her body, and one of her eyesockets was empty and bleeding. Both Charles and Mrs Casterton were covered in blood and Mrs Casterton was laughing, too. The room was a shambles. Ornaments and furniture were broken and strewn over the floor and the bed was a mass of bloodstained bedclothes.

'My God!' shouted Cynthia. 'Oh my God! Leave her you devils! Leave her alone, d'you hear me?'

Neither of them took the slightest notice and Cynthia began pummelling Mrs Casterton in a frenzy, with tears pouring down her cheeks. 'Leave her,' she went on screaming. 'Leave her you bastards!'

The girl was making little whimpering kitten noises, and waving her hands about pathetically, then she slumped in Mrs Casterton's arms and Mrs Casterton let her slip to the floor. Charles bent over her. 'Get up!' he ordered fiercely. 'Get up you bitch! You filthy, filthy bitch!'

At last Mrs Casterton who had been watching him expressionlessly, said, 'That's it my darling! It is all over, my beloved. She has gone. The horrible creature has gone and she won't ever trouble anyone again, because she's dead!'

Charles straightened up and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. 'That was good,' he said. 'Very good. Another piece of filth less in this dreadful, polluted, world.' His chest was heaving from his exertions, and he suddenly laughed again. 'Oh how splendid, Mims!' he exclaimed. 'Wasn't that good? Didn't you

enjoy it? I did! You're a dream Mimsy. My one and only dream. And now we have shared everything my beloved. My one and only beloved.'

He suddenly seemed to become aware of Cynthia for the first time. 'What are you doing here?' he demanded haughtily. 'Can't you see you are interrupting a love scene? You're not wanted. Go away.'

He was as mad as a hatter. And so of course, was Mrs Casterton.

Mrs Casterton nodded, and without turning round she said calmly. 'Charles is right Cynthia. Go back to bed. I will come and talk to you when we have finished. As you can see we have a good deal of clearing up to do in here. I'll come to your room when we're ready.'

'Yes,' agreed Cynthia, stupefied by shock, 'I'll go back to bed.'

'The best place for a sickening woman like you,' sneered Charles.

'We'll be talking to you later, my dear,' said Mrs Casterton. 'Don't worry. We have plenty of things to discuss.'

She exchanged a quick look with Charles who suddenly seemed pleased and Cynthia, hardly able to walk with terror and disgust, tottered back to her room.

She lay on her bed again, with her knees shaking, and her whole body aching as though she had caught some strange illness. What was she to do? What in heaven's name was she to do?

It was now four o'clock. Never had a night seemed longer!

At five, precisely, Mrs Casterton came to her room. 'Ah, good!' she exclaimed in a satisfied voice. 'Still awake, I see. Now come along my dear. Everything is shipshape again in Charles's room, and the three of us have a great deal to talk about.'

'I'm exhausted,' said Cynthia. 'I leave here at midday today, and I have hardly slept a wink. Please go away, and we'll talk when I have slept.'

'No, my dear,' said Mrs Casterton. 'That will be too late. You must come to the sitting room now.'

Cynthia turned over in bed, and shut her eyes. 'No,' she said, bravely. 'Another time.'

'Now, now,' scolded Mrs Casterton, playfully. 'We mustn't be a silly girl. We must do what we are told, or Mims will get angry, and you mustn't make me angry, Cynthia, because I have a very

nasty temper when I'm roused. Get up at once, and come into the living room.'

'No.'

'I'm serious,' said Mrs Casterton, and her voice had an edge to it. 'Get out of bed, or I'll get you out myself. I am very strong, you know. You haven't a chance if I decide to use force, so do what you are told, because I don't like waiting.'

Cynthia got out of bed and began putting on her dressing gown.

'What are you putting on that silly thing for?' demanded Mrs Casterton. 'We've both seen you in your nightie now, so you won't be needing it. Anyway I shall be undressing you very soon.'

'Undressing me?' Cynthia could hardly speak.

'Certainly. Charles can't have his way with you unless you are undressed, can he? And he likes me to do the undressing. It gives us both a thrill!' She leaned forward and suddenly crushed one of Cynthia's breasts in her hand. 'Nice,' she commented. 'Charles will enjoy that. He likes biting breasts and eating the flesh.'

Cynthia made a dash for the door, but Mrs Casterton caught her. 'Now where on earth do you think you're going? You haven't a chance in hell, my dear, and that's where you'll be shortly, if we both know our business.' She chuckled, then suddenly kneed Cynthia in the back. 'Get along to the sitting room. I'm beginning to lose my cool,' she said angrily.

With a faint hope that if she could make the discussion last long enough, there might be an interruption from the postman, the milkman, or even some last moment heavenly intervention, Cynthia walked ahead of Mrs Casterton to the sitting room. She passed Charles's room on the way, and it was once again meticulously tidy. All evidence of the dreadful scene she had seen a little while before had been removed, though there was a large and shapeless bundle wrapped in what looked like a huge plastic bag at the foot of the bed. She shuddered.

Charles was dressed in a clean white shirt and jeans, and looked dapper and chipper, as the two women joined him. He was playing with what appeared to be a small marble; throwing it into the air, and catching it in his mouth. He stopped when he saw Cynthia, and said, 'Ah, Cynthia. Sit down. Take the weight off your feet.'

Cynthia almost fell into the nearest chair, Charles went to the armchair by the window, and Mrs Casterton sat by the table, facing

Cynthia. 'We thought we would explain everything that is going to happen to you Cynthia, my dear. More fun!' said Mrs Casterton.

Cynthia said nothing.

Mrs Casterton studied her for a moment, then went on. 'A few years ago Charles developed the habit of killing young girls.' She looked fondly at Charles, and continued. 'At first, I must say, though more or less everything he does is all right in my sight, I really didn't approve. For one thing I thought it was dangerous for him. The penalty is so severe if one is caught. However I soon realized that he wanted to compensate for his childhood, so I came round to it.' She was speaking in an utterly matter of fact tone, and she bent forward with an indulgent smile to pat Charles on the knee.

'You weren't frightened for yourself?' asked Cynthia, forcing herself to speak.

'Of course not, you ridiculous girl!' retorted Mrs Casterton. 'The whole point was that the girls he wanted to kill should be young.'

'I told you Cynthia was a bitch, Mims,' said Charles airily, 'but you wouldn't believe me.'

'I do now, dear.'

Charles nodded, looking satisfied. 'Well, lately this habit has developed into a craving,' went on Mrs Casterton, 'and so I realized that if I wanted to keep his affection, I must share with him. We have always been united in everything else that we have considered of the slightest importance, so I realized we must be united in this. Charles wouldn't hear of it. He didn't want to involve me, you see, if things went wrong, bless him. While I was away though, the naughty boy went on a bender on his own. He wanted to get his obsession out of his system he said, before I got back, but of course that won't really do. It simply won't do. One must share everything, in love. Everything. Happiness, sorrow, the drab day to day living, and the great moments. Tonight we have shared in the most exciting moment of our lives. Charles is right. To scotch evil; to expunge it from the face of the earth is a duty, and the resulting excitement is our reward. Presently we shall share such an excitement with you.'

'I want no part of it,' said Cynthia vehemently.

'Oh but my dear, you are the central figure,' replied Mrs Casterton, smiling.

And for the first time Cynthia recognized what she had really known all along in her heart. They were going to kill her. How could she have imagined otherwise? They hadn't shown the least alarm when they had discovered that she had been present at the ghastly death of that wretched girl. Of course she couldn't be allowed to remain alive, once she had been in on their secret!

'If you touch me you'll get caught,' she said. 'Adam is expecting me tomorrow . . . no, today. He'll make inquiries.'

'We've thought of that,' replied Mrs Casterton, simply. 'We have until this evening, before there is the slightest worry, and all our plans are fully laid. The neighbours here think you have already left for Brussels, and so do the car hire firm. We told them that your plans had altered at the last moment; that we tried to get them on the telephone, but that their number was engaged so we were forced to look elsewhere. Naturally we have not done that. We have said the same as regards your flight, and Adam has had a message to say that your brother is ill, and that you will be telephoning him this evening. Your brother has had a message to say that Adam is ill, and that you have had to go to him at once, but will be ringing him this evening! Neat, isn't it? Your late employers will be told that you are no longer with us, having left last night, and so will any of your girl friends. Luckily none of them are great friends. Naturally no one will know that I share Charles's new passion, so I can make a perfect alibi for him, which is why the last two murders have taken place in this flat. We never left here last night, you see. I was with Charles all the time. I think I can say with justifiable pride that we have thought of every eventuality.'

'How are you going to get rid of the girl's body? Or, for that matter, of mine?' demanded Cynthia.

Charles laughed. 'Everything is being taken care of, so don't worry on our account,' he said gaily. 'Catch.' He threw the little marble he had been playing with at her, and Cynthia suddenly saw that it was an eyeball. She stifled a scream as she dropped it, and Charles laughed again. 'Soon I will have three to play with,' he said.

'Now, to business,' interrupted Mrs Casterton, briskly. 'The procedure is this. We shall go into Charles's room, where I shall undress you, pointing out to him all your most attractive qualities. Charles adores this new part of the assignments. It adds a new di-

mension. Always important with pleasures. They can get so very dull if one becomes satiated, don't you agree? Then Charles will take you to bed and play with you. He is a little rough, I'm afraid, but my advice to you is to relax and enjoy it, because you certainly can't do anything about it with me standing there to watch you, and to help, if you decide to turn a little silly. Then when the poor boy is tired, he will hand you to me, and I will hold you in my arms while he stabs you to death. Once you are dead, he stops at once you know. Quite interesting.'

'I shall scream the house down,' said Cynthia.

'No, my dear you won't. We made that mistake before with the other little slut. Luckily no one heard her, and I doubt if anyone would hear you, but just to play safe, we will cut out your tongue.'

Cynthia fainted, and when she came round again there was a gag in her mouth, and the two of them were slapping her face hard. Charles on seeing that she was reviving offered her a glass of water, and Cynthia dashed it to the ground. 'Now that is purely idiotic,' said Mrs Casterton sternly. 'Fainting I mean! It is psychosomatic, and no use at all. You will avoid nothing and only protract the proceedings. Oh Charles darling, you forgot the kitchen scissors for her tongue, you silly boy. Run and get them, then we'll go next door.'

Cynthia made a dash for it, but of course she had no hope. Charles caught her, and she struggled wildly. 'Oh, Mimsy. Isn't it lovely?' exclaimed Charles. 'She's going to struggle. Oh how I love a good struggle! Fun, Mimsy! Fun, my wonderful, lovely, Mimsy! I'll hurry and get the scissors, but all the rest will be done very slowly, won't it, Mimsy?'

'At a snail's pace, my beloved.'

Mrs Casterton smiled indulgently as he left the room, then she leaned forward and whispered confidentially, to Cynthia. 'I can tell you now because it's safe. Did you know, I wear a wig? Under it I'm quite, quite bald.'

Rosemary Timperley

The thug

He was beginning to trouble her mind, haunt her dreams, and creep unwanted into her thoughts. She dreaded going out now because she was almost sure to see him. His squat, drab little figure would be standing outside a shop or at a street corner, watching the world go by. Or perhaps not really watching? Empty-minded? Impossible to tell.

At first she'd thought of him as 'the dwarf', but he wasn't quite small enough to be called that. He was the same height as some rather small women. But there was nothing in the least feminine about him – none of that sensitivity which marks the male who has a high proportion of female qualities. He was very much a man, despite his size. A strange, lonely, swarthy-skinned little man, standing around day after day, doing nothing.

If he'd always stood in the same place, she could have avoided him. She took different routes to and from the shops anyway, yet nearly always she caught sight of him somewhere – his flat hat, his conventional suit, his strong, thick arms held stiffly by his sides. She had never seen him on the move but guessed that when he walked his arms would not swing. It would be as if he were saving them for something – something special . . .

Although she found his existence disturbing, it did not cross her mind that he was aware of her as an individual, among the many other hurrying women in the busy streets – until the day when she came on him suddenly, turning a corner and almost falling over him – and he stared straight into her eyes.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she said. His eyes held hers. She turned her head away and walked on. When she glanced back, she saw that he was still standing in the same spot, but his gaze was following her. A queer little shiver thrilled down her spine.

The memory of his eyes stayed with her all day: narrow, penetrating, dark brown, and without feeling. If eyes really are the

'windows of the soul,' she thought, either he has no soul, or he has learned to draw curtains of deceit over those windows.

It was on a Friday that she had received this disconcerting stare from him and on the Saturday, when her husband was with her, she saw him again.

She nudged her husband. 'See that dwarflike person over there? He gives me the willies.'

'Why?' Her husband regarded the other man with indifference.

'There's something peculiar about him.'

'Not really. It's rough luck on a chap not to grow to full height. One can't help feeling sorry for him, but he seems ordinary enough to me.'

'He gave me a funny look yesterday,' she said weakly.

'You're not unattractive,' smiled her husband. 'I've seen plenty of men give you the once over in the street. Poor little chap probably thinks you look dishy but "the flowers are not for him to pick".'

'No, it wasn't a sexy look.'

'What then?'

'Oh, I don't know. I'm just being silly.'

Her husband did not argue that one and forgot the small conversation on the instant, little knowing that one day, if he had been able to remember it, it might have saved lives.

Monday came and she saw the man again. He was standing outside the store where she did most of her shopping. He looked hard at her and she felt compelled to nod and say 'Good morning.'

He gave the faintest of nods but did not speak. Her heart was beating uncomfortably fast as she went inside. Having made her purchases she came out by a different door – and he was standing there.

She jumped so much that her shopping bag jerked and a couple of oranges fell to the pavement. Red-cheeked, she pursued them. She rescued one at the kerb. The other rolled into the roadway. Traffic was bashing back and forth and she wasn't going to risk her neck for an orange, so she turned away, trying to look as if the wayward fruit was nothing to do with her.

But the little man moved. Arms straight down by his sides, he stepped into the road, ignoring an approaching car, bent down and picked up the orange. The car screeched to a halt. The driver

shouted: 'Wanna get yerself killed?' The other took no notice. He returned to her and, unsmiling, handed over the orange. She noticed how large and strong his hand was.

'Thank you very much,' she said, 'but you shouldn't have taken such a chance.'

Then he spoke to her for the first time, and his words were totally unexpected: 'Will you come and see my carpet?'

'Your carpet?'

'Will you come and see my carpet?' he repeated. He had a flat voice with a slight cockney accent.

'I'm afraid I can't—' she began, but he broke in quietly: 'Because I am not tall does not mean I should be treated with contempt.'

'Of course it doesn't. I wasn't—' She recalled her husband's compassion towards the little man, genuine albeit patronizing. Surely she could be the same. After all, he had rescued her orange at risk to himself.

'Allright,' she said. 'Where is it? Do you want to sell it perhaps?' Maybe, she considered, that was why he stood around. He wouldn't be allowed to sell carpets in the street, the way they do out East, so possibly he picked on likely-looking customers, then invited them to inspect his wares.

'No, I don't want to sell it,' he said, as they walked along. 'I want you to see it. I show it only to special people. We haven't far to go.'

They turned down a sidestreet and entered a house of bed-sitters. 'I have a room here,' he told her. 'The basement room. My carpet is there.'

As she followed him, she thought: I must be mad to come home with a stranger like this. What's happening to me? She felt afraid, yet ashamed of her fear, for she could find no rational justification for it. She told herself that he was simply lonely, desperate for company. It would be an act of kindness to look at his carpet, then quickly take her leave.

They had descended a flight of stairs which led from the ground floor and now he opened the door of his room. 'Here we are,' he said. And she gave a gasp of sheer admiration, for although most of the decorations were dull and shabby, the carpet which covered the floor was beautiful – a tangible dream of many colours and

designs. She guessed it had been woven by hand rather than machine and must be valuable.

They stood side by side, looking down at it.

'It's marvellous,' she said sincerely. 'Thank you very much for letting me see it. Where did you get it?'

'From my father. My mother was English but he was Indian. It is an Indian carpet. He and his fellow-workers made it. That was when he was young. He was taught carpet-weaving at one of the schools set up by William Sleeman.'

He looked at her as if the name should mean something to her, then said, 'You haven't heard of him?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Queen Victoria bought a similar one. You can see it in the Waterloo Chamber at Windsor Castle. But it is no finer than mine, which I didn't have to buy. It was passed on to me when my father died. I keep it to myself for most of the time, but once a year, in the season – and this is the season,' he added thoughtfully, 'I show it to someone special. Someone worthy. This year, I chose you.'

'I'm neither special nor worthy,' she said, trying to sound more light-hearted than she felt, 'but thank you very much. You must be proud to own such a fine carpet.'

'I am indeed. You see, Madam, it is a Thug carpet.'

The word 'Thug' startled her. She thought of thugs as those gangs of moronic youths who roam the streets looking for a punch-up. He read her thought and said:

'The word "thug" is used improperly in this country. I am speaking of the real Thugs of India. My grandfather was one. He regarded being a Thug as a sacred calling. But the British didn't see it that way. They captured him and gaoled him for life, along with many others of the sect. Then they collected the sons of Thugs together, boys such as my father, and put them in schools to learn carpet-weaving, brick-making, building. Sleeman founded such schools. Thug carpets became famous.'

'But what did these Thugs do to get themselves gaoled? Were they robbers?'

'No. They were honourable men. They killed travellers to serve their goddess, Kali. She is the Hindu goddess of death. Every year, during the pilgrimage season, groups of men travelled the lonely roads of India. The Thugs lay in wait for them and killed them.'

Then they would dismember the bodies and disfigure the faces, all in honour of their goddess, and bury them. They would then encamp on the burial ground and hold a ritual feast, called the Tuponee. One delicacy at the feast was *goor*, a kind of coarse sugar with holy properties. Those who had killed were rewarded with a portion of *goor*. If one who had not killed ate some *goor*, he was sent out straight away to find and kill a traveller.'

The little man described all this in a monotonous, unexcited voice, as if the Thugs' murderous activities were all in the day's work.

'Don't look so shocked,' he said to her. 'It was all in the day's work for Thugs to behave so. It was their duty, the practical part of their religion. After all, if you worship the goddess of death, you've got to present her with the dead. But the Thugs didn't do it just anyhow. They had a ritual method.'

'What was that?' She felt half-hypnotized.

'Strangulation. Each Thug wore a scarf round his waist. When they were walking with a group of pilgrims they'd made friends with, a secret sign would be given. At that, one man would slip his scarf – it's called a *rumal* – round the victim's neck and, with the help of another man, would draw it tight. Meanwhile a third man seized the victim's legs and pulled them backwards, flinging him face-down on the ground. He couldn't resist. Death was swift. There were usually more than three Thugs to each pilgrim, so not everyone was lucky enough to have the chance to kill each time. They had to be patient and wait their turn. But then they were patient types. Out of the season, they led innocent lives, very ordinary and peaceful. One was even a devoted nurse to some British children. He took periodic leaves to "visit a sick mother". The family got the shock of their lives when they heard how he really spent his leaves. He'd seemed so gentle, they said. But then the word "Thug" in Hindustani means "one who deceives". Their everyday behaviour was a mask to hide what really mattered to them – and that was killing for Kali.'

'Was it only pilgrims that they murdered?'

'I don't like the use of the word "murder" in this connection. Murder has a base motive – robbery, jealousy, frustrated lust, or sheer sadism. Ritual killing is quite different. The motive is of the highest. It's the most sincere form of worship. Sometimes they

felt human pity for their victims, but they wouldn't let that get in the way of their religious duty. However, to answer your question. In the early days of the sect, they killed any traveller at all except people in certain categories. They spared women, because Kali was a woman; lepers, the blind and the disabled; anyone driving a cow or female goat; and any craftsmen whose work was protected by Kali – gold-, iron- and brass-workers, carpenters, stone-cutters and shoemakers. But as the numbers of Thugs increased and there was need for more victims, those old rules went by the board. My father told me that my grandfather had killed women without turning a hair. Kali needed the dead. That was the main thing. I can show you a photo of my grandfather.'

He drew a faded photograph from his wallet and passed it to her. She saw a tall, well-built figure clad in white blouse and baggy trousers, a turban on his head and a sash round his waist. The man in the photograph had a beard but otherwise his face was very similar to that of his grandson, who now stood before her, while the beautiful carpet seemed to blossom at their feet.

She pointed to the sash. 'Is that the scarf which—'

'That's right. That's the *rumal*, used for strangling. My father managed to preserve one of those old *rumals* and gave it to me as a memento of my grandfather. This is it.'

He unbuttoned and removed his jacket and she saw that he was wearing a sash identical to the one in the photograph. She burst out: 'I don't know how you can endure to wear something that's been used to murder people! It *is* murder!'

'I wear it so that I'll always have it handy,' he said. 'You don't need to have three Thugs to kill one victim. One can manage perfectly well on his own, if he's had plenty of practice.' And with a movement so rapid that she had no chance to resist, he stripped the *rumal* from his body, flung it round her neck, crossed the ends, and pulled with all his might.

When he was quite sure that she was dead, he rolled back the carpet and buried her in a grave already prepared under the floorboards. It was not the only one, but, at the moment, the only empty one. He then replaced the carpet, carefully as any housewife, and settled down to a solitary ritual feast, which included some of the precious *goor*, that sugar which, once tasted, confirmed a man to Thuggee for the rest of his life. While he feasted he prayed to

Kali. He knew that she was pleased with his offering and would now protect him until the next season, when she would demand another sacrifice.

On the following morning, he stood in the shopping street as usual and watched the people go by. He even watched the husband of the dead woman enter the police station, and smiled within himself, without moving his lips. He took deep, satisfied breaths. He always felt immensely fit after a ritual killing. His goddess was with him, and the *rumal* hugged his waist.

The police could find no clue in the case of the wife who had simply disappeared while out shopping. And when, in the following year, another housewife mysteriously disappeared, they did not link the two cases, nor link them with women who had vanished from home in previous years. After all, there were no bodies, and women quite often did leave their husbands, never to be heard of again.

And never the least shadow of suspicion fell upon the Thug. He was such a very familiar sight to the local police. They'd even nicknamed him 'Dopey', after one of Snow White's seven dwarfs. They didn't take him seriously and pitied him all the more for his small stature because they themselves were attractively tall.

So the little man still stands in the shopping street like a familiar landmark. He is watching and waiting—waiting for the next season, when Kali will become restless and demanding, and he will do her bidding. At this very moment there is a young woman who shops daily in that street and keeps noticing him. She even tries, in vain, to avoid seeing him, without quite knowing why. And already he is beginning to trouble her mind, haunt her dreams, and creep unwanted into her thoughts . . .

Ruth Cameron

Dolly

She walked like a doll. That was the first thing I noticed about her as I watched from my window while she came up the front path with Patrick, who had just married her. Her arms hung straight down by her sides without the suggestion of a swing, and her rigid legs plodded forward in small, perfectly even paces. When she turned her head, it was with a jerky movement, and when she stretched out her arm to point to something, she did it like an automaton.

Then I heard her speak. I couldn't make out the words as my window was closed and there was a distance between us, but she had a rather loud, unmodulated voice, devoid of animation. Listening to it, you had no idea whether she was pleased or cross, calm or excited, happy or sad. A mechanical voice. Why, in heaven's name, had Patrick, my sensitive young fellow lodger, married such a zombie of a girl?

Well – for her looks. What else? When she stood still and stayed silent, she was beautiful. Like an exquisite coloured statue. Long, thick, dark hair, sky-blue eyes, full red lips, rosy cheeks, and the sort of figure that men usually describe with their hands rather than with words – as if they were caressing an invisible violin. Yes, I could understand any man falling for her, especially someone shy and lonely like Patrick – he'd feel so lucky to get her! But to me, an old woman, her beautiful looks did not compensate for her want of grace, her unfeeling voice, her general lack of – of humanity.

I thought Patrick just might come and introduce her to me, but he didn't. They went directly into his bed sit, which was next to mine. Here they were to start their married life. Patrick had lived there alone for about a year and the only change he'd made now was to import a double bed. I had seen it delivered. It took up a lot of space in the room, which was not large. What a way to start! I thought. There'll have to be a lot of love to make up for the cramped living space. Yet, having seen them together, I'd noticed

the admiration in the young husband's eyes, mingled with a tender concern; but in the girl's eyes, no love at all. Nothing. A glassy stare. It was as if those beautiful blue eyes were windows to an empty soul.

That night I listened to their voices through the thin wall which separated us. I couldn't hear what was said, but I could tell that she did most of the talking in that flat, dead tone, and he seemed to be encouraging her to chat away – he, with his expressive, lilting, Irish voice. It was the very opposite of hers and began to sound to me like that of a trapped creature, beating itself against a stone wall. I only hoped that she was 'good in bed', to make up for her other inadequacies.

Next morning at seven-thirty, I heard Patrick set out to work as usual. Evidently he couldn't afford a 'honeymoon'. He did a hum-drum factory job with long hours and low pay. After he'd gone, there was silence in their room. She was probably catching up on sleep, I thought, while he had to go right back to the treadmill.

At eleven I went shopping and returned at about midday. I hadn't bothered to lock the door of my room as I was to be out for such a short time, and when I entered it again, I got a shock.

For the girl was standing there.

'Are you Mrs Carter?' she asked flatly, without raising her voice at the end of the question the way most people do.

'Yes. What are you—' I'd been going to say: 'What are you doing in my room?' but she interrupted me with: 'What am I? I'm Patrick's wife. Hello.' Then she nodded jerkily, as I murmured a little 'Hello' back; walked out of my room, leaving the door open; returned to her own, and closed that door.

And I found I was trembling. The woman was uncanny. So beautiful to look at and yet so repellent in every other respect. I yearned for the 'old days' when Patrick and I had lived peacefully side by side in our separate territories, and he would no more have dreamed of walking into my room when I was out than I'd have dreamed of walking into his. I'd lock my door in future, when I went out . . .

As I made some coffee, to pull myself together, I went over the girl's statements in my mind: *What am I? I'm Patrick's wife. Hello.* Surely it would have been more normal if she'd told me her first name. But then there was nothing 'normal' about this one.

I found myself nervously aware of her presence and wished she'd go out. It was a lovely day. But she stayed there in silence, didn't even play Patrick's little radio, and I was sure she wasn't reading. Then, at about three in the afternoon, she began to talk. Once again, I couldn't hear what she was saying, only this hard, monotonous voice going on and on.

Now I don't go along with the theory that people who talk to themselves are batty. Those who live alone need to talk to someone, and if the only someone on the premises is the self, what harm in the outlet of a chat? But this girl went on talking without pausing for thought and without any expression. She spoke as flatly to herself as she did to others.

I began to speculate wildly: Perhaps there's something physically wrong with her vocal apparatus. Maybe she was 'dumb' as a child, or autistic; then received treatment and therapy, and now that she can speak, has been advised to use her voice as much as possible, to 'oil the wheels', as it were. If only it weren't such a deadly, deadening voice!

She kept up her non-stop drone until Patrick returned from work at seven-thirty. I heard her say: 'Hello,' as he entered their room, and she said it in the same blank way in which she'd said: 'Hello', to me. There was no love or welcome in her tone. Patrick's 'Hello, me darling!' was different, so sweet and gentle. Then he closed the door and she went on talking, as if she were still talking to herself.

Later the smell of frying filtered through to my room. This was familiar. Patrick nearly always had a fry up when he came home and was simply carrying on his old habit. For I had a feeling that he, not she, was doing the cooking, such as it was. I'd also noticed that, when he was coming up the path, he'd been carrying his bag of shopping as usual. You'd have thought his new wife could have done that much for him.

Still, I told myself I mustn't be uncharitable. If she had recently been an invalid, with this voice trouble, she might have been medically advised to stay at home and rest a lot.

She went on talking during their meal, and afterwards, when I crossed the passage to go to the bathroom, I saw Patrick doing the washing up at the communal sink. Maybe, I thought, his wife, with her jerky hands, is *unable* to do chores.

Patrick smiled nervously as I passed and said: 'I gather my wife introduced herself to you. I'm sorry if she—'

'That's all right,' I interrupted quickly. 'It was nice of her to bother. But she didn't tell me her name.'

'Dolly,' he said, flushing slightly, piling the dishes on a tray, and diving swiftly back into his room, where I could hear his wife still talking.

Dolly. My original impression of her came flashing back. She was like a doll. And then my imagination took flight, as I surmised that she might indeed be some miracle-of-science sort of doll – very nearly human but not quite – like dead-brained patients on a life machine. Some twentieth-century Pygmalion, I thought madly, had made a statue of a beautiful woman, rigged it up with various electronic devices so that it could move and breathe and mate; fitted in a voicebox so it could speak; and fed its computer brain with a little simple material, so that it could 'do the polite' as far as saying: *What am I? I'm Patrick's wife. Hello.* But that computer-brain had not been sophisticated enough to know that to walk into a neighbour's room while the other was out was hardly *comme il faut*.

As time passed and the routine of Patrick's and Dolly's life together stayed just as it had been on that first day – except that she didn't visit me again – I became more and more convinced that she was a sort of dummy. Was Patrick taking part in some weird scientific experiment? I longed to question him but he was avoiding me, as if he were afraid of questions. Of course I told myself it was all none of my business, but there is such a thing as atmosphere and with the best will in the world one is affected by it. There was definitely something strange about Patrick's wife and the fact that I was left in ignorance made me even more uneasy than if he'd confided something really unpleasant to me. The unknown itself has a fearful quality.

As it was, I found that my neighbours were occupying my mind. I thought of them when I woke in the morning and didn't get rid of them till I fell asleep at night. And even then they would enter my dreams.

Since the girl hadn't approached me again and obviously had no desire to 'make friends' – well, why should she? Generation gap and all that – I'd gone back to my old habit of leaving my door

unlocked when I went out. The result was that one morning when I came in from shopping – there she was.

As she never went out and, since that first time, I'd seen her only when, by chance, I glimpsed her back view plodding along to the bathroom, I saw with a shock of surprise how she'd changed. It was her figure. And suddenly I wanted to laugh at myself and my own wild notions of her being a dummy. For this was no doll. Patrick's wife was pregnant.

'Hello, Mrs Carter,' she said, in that flat voice of which I heard so much on the other side of the wall. 'I'm going to have a baby next week.'

'Oh, congratulations!' I worked up a friendly smile. She did not smile back. Just gave that jerky nod, walked out and returned to her own room. She had 'done the polite' and now that little job was finished.

That evening I made a point of catching Patrick, despite his elusiveness. I waited till he'd begun to wash their supper things at the sink, then went right out to him. 'So you're going to be a father. That's super!' I said.

'Thanks.' He grinned. He looked happy.

And now, my curiosity ablaze, I plunged in with: 'Patrick, who is Dolly?'

This time he didn't put me off. Instead, while the dishes clattered and the water swished, he gave me a quiet and fluent account of his wife's past.

'She comes from the world of show business,' he said. 'Her mother died giving birth to her and her father took charge. He was a ventriloquist and used a baby doll as a dummy. But he soon began to use his real daughter instead. Right from her babyhood, she was trained to be a ventriloquist's doll. Audiences used to think she *was* a doll. I thought so myself at first. Then I got to know her and found she was flesh and blood. But she behaved more like a dummy than a grown-up woman, and I thought that was bad. I tried to persuade her father to let her off the hook, but he refused, and she had no will of her own. He seemed to think for her just as, on the stage, he spoke for her. It was his voice that seemed to come from her lips.'

'But it's horrific!'

'That's what I thought. I wondered what the hell I was going to

do about it. And then, suddenly, the Lord seemed to be on my side. The father had a stroke and died. Dolly had no one but me. So I married her and brought her here. I encouraged her to use her own voice as much as possible, even when she was alone. I wanted to make her human again. I knew she'd seem peculiar to other people, but she's so beautiful that I can't help loving her. All the same, I thought I was failing with her – until we found she was pregnant. What could be more human than pregnancy? But I still kept my fingers crossed and didn't speak of it to anyone in case anything went wrong – but now – she's fit – and the kid is due to be born next week – and I'm on top of the world about it!

'Yes. I'm so glad for you.'

'I'm sorry I've been giving you the cold shoulder. You see, I knew you thought her odd . . . and she is a bit odd . . . and . . . oh, but she'll be all right now. Having a baby will make all the difference. She'll be a real woman, feeding it and looking after it and taking it out in a pram . . . I'm sure she'll start going out once she's got a baby to show off to the world.' He was going on quite lyrically, but now he stopped as the washing up was done and the clatter no longer masked his voice. He smiled, piled up the dishes and began to carry them back. I returned to my room too.

The next week came. Dolly went off to hospital and all was blissfully quiet in the room next door. But that didn't last for long. In what seemed to me a remarkably short time, they were back. It reminded me of the moments after their wedding when they had come up the path together, the girl walking so jerkily and talking in that mechanical tone. She still moved jerkily, still talked mechanically, but this time her arms did not hang straight down by her sides. She carried a bundle in her arms.

I decided to go out and greet them, so reached the front door and opened it while Patrick was still finding his key.

'Welcome back,' I said, smiling – but Patrick gave me a look of stunned horror which filled me with foreboding. What was wrong? Was the baby deformed? Or – dead? Suddenly I dared not look down at that bundle in the girl's arms. Instead I looked into her face. And for the first time it wore an expression, rather than being blank. The expression was one of complacency.

'Hello, Mrs Carter,' she said. Stiffly she held out her arms. 'Look at my baby.' She pulled aside the coverings and, with a flash of

relief and pleasure, I saw the most beautiful little baby I'd ever seen in all my life. 'How exquisite!' I murmured. But Patrick's eyes still had that horror stare. What *was* the matter?

I touched the child's cheek. The child born of this girl's beautiful body. And that touch was enough to tell me. The baby wasn't deformed, nor was it dead in the ordinary sense of the word. It had never been alive. It was not of flesh and blood. The mother was *like* a doll. Her baby *was* one.

Brian Mooney

Baby, baby

I was shaking a little as I walked down the corridor. Apprehension, I suppose. I was totally uncertain as to what sort of reception I would get. It took me some time to ring the doorbell, and when I did it was hesitantly.

My Ellie opened the flat door to me. I had been away for a very long time, and Ellie was much thinner than I remembered her. Indeed, she was almost haggard. Her hair was unkempt and straggly, her eyes marred by dark shadows, and there was another dark blemish – not a natural one – on her cheek. And yet those strained eyes shone with a febrile happiness.

‘Oh, Dad,’ she whispered, hugging me close, ‘Oh, Dad, welcome home. And I’ve got such a lovely surprise for you, Dad. I’ve got a baby at last. A beautiful baby girl.’

She was overjoyed and so was I. My Ellie had always wanted a baby. It had been an obsession with her. Even when she was tiny her only ambition was to grow up fast so that she could become a mother. On Saturdays and Sundays I would walk her in the park so that she could admire the babies being aired by their mothers or nannies. She could ask for no greater treat.

I think Ellie must have inherited this longing from me, because before she was born I desperately wanted a child. In my marriage there was almost a reversal of roles. I needed a child, yet Ellie’s mother couldn’t have cared less. She was a flighty woman, my wife, interested only in having a good time. Domesticity offended her, unless she happened to benefit from it. So when Ellie did come along, it was more by accident than intention.

I was well into middle age by then, but how I loved that little daughter of mine. And as well I did, too, because my wife was totally uninterested. She thought Ellie an inconvenience, and was more than happy for me to handle all the arduous chores. In the end my wife walked out on us, which was a relief. She went off with an ironmonger, from Tooting I believe.

As I've said, my Ellie always wanted a baby of her own. And I joined in her dreams and encouraged them, all through her childhood. I had realized, I think, that I was unlikely to have any more children of my own, so all I had to look forward to was a grandchild. Even when I tucked her up in bed at night, I did not read her a story: instead we would discuss her growing up and 'our' baby. Our plan was a detailed one. She would marry a nice man, a kind man, who would insist that I went to live with them. Then Ellie would have her baby and we would all live happily ever after.

Life can play some unpleasant tricks. Ellie and I had little more than a couple of years together when they took her away from me. The authorities were less enlightened in those days, and it was generally held that a single man in a lowly clerical job was no fit custodian for a child, especially a girl child. So the local authority put her into care. I believe that they did approach my wife, but she cared not a jot. They were magnanimous enough to allow me to visit Ellie once a week, and sometimes to have her for a day or two during holiday times, but what sort of way is that to treat a father and daughter who are devoted to each other? They punctiliously pointed out that should I marry again then Ellie would be returned to me, but as I said at the time, it was unlikely that a poor specimen like me would ever gain a second wife.

They – the vast, amorphous, faceless 'they' who often do so much harm in the name of good – they took my Ellie away from me, and when they did they took something else away from me. Ellie had not been gone very long when I began to suffer odd fits, disturbing but not serious at the time. I started to wander off, to forget things, to go into a state not unlike shock. I always knew when I was about to have a fit, for I became dizzy, and my head ached abominably, and a haze seemed to envelop me, obscuring my vision. So they took me away too.

Although I was taken away on a number of occasions, I was never – in those early days – detained for too long because I was harmless and an object of pity rather than censure. The people at the children's home were always a little wary of me, but my behaviour was impeccable and they had no excuse to stop me visiting Ellie. I did notice that a cautious eye was kept on me during these visits, but to be fair I must admit it was unobtrusive.

Ellie and I ignored our overseers. We were with each other, and

that was all that mattered. We would huddle together as of old and animatedly discuss our plans for the future. They never varied, except perhaps in small detail. Ellie's husband was going to be a really good man, and he and I would be such good friends. And of course Ellie would have her baby for us to pamper and love.

Ellie returned home to me when she was sixteen. I don't doubt that they tried to dissuade her, but my Ellie was loyal. For a number of years things were very good for us. My little fits gradually diminished, and for a while they stopped altogether. Ellie blossomed, and I was very proud of her. Then one day Ellie met Tom Forbes, the man she was eventually to marry, and everything began to fall apart again.

I have no idea where she met the fellow, but he most certainly wasn't the man we'd dreamed of all through the years. I can't begin to surmise what the attraction was in the first place, but then I wasn't an impressionable young girl; possibly he had qualities I could not recognize. Tom Forbes was a butcher's assistant, several years older than Ellie, a huge, brooding man with slick, greased hair. I took an aversion to him on sight, and as I got to know him my dislike increased. He was both stupid and arrogant, treating me with offhand contempt and Ellie as if she was already his chattel.

The fault must have been mine. I chose to ignore the fact that Ellie has a stubborn core. If I hadn't been so blatant in my dislike of Forbes, if I hadn't forbidden her to associate with him, then she might have come to recognize the type of man he was. I am sure that if I had left well alone, in time she would have sent him packing. But as it was I distressed her, and we began to quarrel, I think for the first time in our lives. The outcome of this was that my fits returned, and they became progressively worse. In the end I had to go back to the hospital for prolonged treatment, which effectively made impotent my influence over Ellie. On her twenty-first birthday, while I was away from home, she married Tom Forbes.

Just one thing in our dream did not go wrong. When I left the hospital I did go to live with Ellie and Tom. There was no way Tom could prevent this, for he had moved into our little flat.

He turned out to be a bad husband, did Tom Forbes, worse even than I had expected him to be. He was brutish, foul-mouthed and a drunkard. Even in the bedroom he had no finesse. Through the

thin wall separating our bedrooms I could hear him, night after night, performing his husbandly duty. That is a pompous way of saying it, but I cannot say he made love to Ellie. Making love suggests warmth, affection, tenderness. Tom rutted on Ellie, sunk his filthy body into hers until he'd satisfied himself. It was as if he was masturbating into warm flesh. He would pant and grunt, and squeal like a hog when finishing, but from poor Ellie I heard no sound of pleasure ever, just quiet weeping when the beast had done and slept. Why, even I had been able, at times, to give my wife some pleasure in bed.

Much as it distressed me, I did hope that a child would result from the man's animal-like behaviour. A forlorn hope. When Ellie and I broached the subject one evening, he shattered our dreams in no uncertain terms. 'Get stuffed,' he sneered, 'Why d'yer think I spend all that money on frenchies? I'll be fucked if any shitty, squalling brat's gonna muck my life up.'

I was baffled by Tom's attitude to having a child. His type of man is so often impatient for the appearance of babies if only to prove to his cronies how virile he is. I do know that his ability to copulate meant a great deal to him, for on one occasion he actually took me out for a drink, and he disgusted me by spending the evening boasting to his friends about the way he 'stuck it up Ellie each night'. 'Yeah,' he bragged, 'keep 'em well fed and well fucked and they ain't got nothing to complain about.'

At least he was right about keeping Ellie well fed. We wanted for nothing on that score. Because of his trade he supplied our larder with the very best of meats, and bought other good foods very cheaply from business contacts. He kept a gleaming set of butcher's knives and tools in the kitchen, and even I must admit he knew what he was about. But this minor aspect of good living could not compensate for the man himself.

The sound of Tom's slobbering lust was not the only noise to emanate from that bedroom. At times I caught the sounds of raging and of violence. And then there came a time when Ellie rarely appeared without some fresh bruise or abrasion. I don't think that either of them realized how thin the walls in the flat were, for both told me that Ellie kept falling over or blundering into furniture.

You may wonder why I did nothing to prevent this. Look at me.

I'm small, and have been described as weedy. Tom Forbes was over six feet in height, strong and vicious. And anyway, I've always been something of a coward. I did try to speak to him about it on one occasion, but he gripped me by the shirtfront and thrust his snarling face close to mine. 'Listen, you old cunt,' he growled, shaking me, 'you should know better than come between husband and wife. If you don't keep your nose out, you'll be complaining through a mouthful of broken bone. Okay?' And he slapped me on the face, not hard but enough to emphasize his point. Believe me, I needed no second warning.

It's really very surprising that I lasted as long as I did without having one of my funny turns. I think that for a while Ellie's plight gave me some strength. Even if I could do nothing constructive, I could keep an eye on her. From time to time I could feel myself slipping into that dreadful haziness, but I mustered all the inner determination that I could to stave off the breakdown. You see, I was worried about Ellie's stability. If life caused me to crack so easily, it was possible that she had inherited my weaknesses. I watched her surreptitiously, wary for signs of encroaching mania. She told me much later that she had been watching me equally keenly, helplessly following my disintegration as it came about.

When I finally went over the edge I made a very good job of it. To this day I do not know what I did, for I was blinded and deafened by the haze and the headache, but it must have been something dreadful. Whatever it was, it happened in public and the police were involved. I still cringe at the thought. They put me away again.

This last time, it was for a stay of long duration. Five years, give or take a few days. At the beginning, both Ellie and Tom visited me. I think that Tom must have been shaken by what had happened, for he seemed to be very concerned about me. When Ellie and I had moments alone, she would tell me that Tom was treating her far more kindly. The surroundings at the hospital seemed to make Tom uneasy, however, and the intervals between his visits lengthened, until in the end Ellie always arrived by herself.

Gradually I noticed that the little signs of brutality were reappearing, and once more she looked miserable and timeworn. Our conversations were now desultory, meaningless. We had long since dispensed with our talks of the baby, and there seemed to be

little to hold us together. Then a little more than a year ago, Ellie herself stopped coming to see me. I was distraught. I thought that my daughter had stopped loving me, had stopped wanting me. But my mind was quickly put at rest, for the letters began to arrive, one, two, sometimes even three a week.

In these letters, Ellie always apologized for not visiting any more, knowing how much she was disappointing me. It seemed that her health was none too good and that the travelling might be bad for her. However, apart from that her letters were bright and chatty, revealing a happiness I had thought to be extinct. She never once explained this sudden euphoria, but its presence pleased me and I think contributed to my return to health. Several weeks ago, I was told that the doctors were very pleased with my progress and that I was being discharged into the care of my family.

And now I had come home to Ellie's wonderful news. She had her baby at last, I had my grandchild. I choked with happiness as I returned my daughter's embrace. Can you understand the emotion I felt? It was a life's longing realized. Now nothing could go wrong, ever again.

'So that's why you stopped visiting me,' I said, mock bullying, 'But why didn't you tell me in one of your letters?'

'I wanted to surprise you, Dad. I wanted to keep something back to make your homecoming special.' Joyful tears spilled as she threw her arms about me again.

'Can I take it that Tom changed his mind about having a baby?', I asked.

Ellie's face became sly for an instant. 'Oh, no,' she whispered, 'I tricked him. Then I didn't tell him anything about it until it was too late.'

'What was his reaction?'

'Oh, he took it well enough when he saw the baby, but I don't think he cares for it at all. He does nothing for her, just totally ignores her.'

'How about...' I was embarrassed, 'How about your... married life?'

'No problems there, Dad,' smiled Ellie, 'He just leaves me alone now. I'm glad, really. I never did enjoy... sex. It always made me feel so... used, used and filthy. I've a suspicion that Tom has a woman somewhere. She's welcome to him. As long as I feed him

on time and keep out of his way he's not worried.' She raised a hand and touched the mark on her cheek, 'This was the first time for simply ages, and he was drunk when he did it.'

'Well, my love, you have me home now to help care for the baby. Can I see her now, please?'

'Oh, yes.' Ellie took my hand and led me to what had been my bedroom. 'I'm afraid that you'll have to share with baby,' she apologized, 'but you understand I have to keep her out of Tom's way. The crying would anger him.'

My room was much as I had left it, except for the cradle standing in the corner near to the window. 'She's asleep now, Dad, so you'll have to be very quiet,' murmured Ellie, 'There, isn't she lovely?'

As I looked from the chubby cheeks of my granddaughter to my daughter, the love I felt for the two of them threatened to burst out from me. Never since the time that Ellie had been born had I experienced such a surge of selfless passion.

'What is her name?'

'I haven't given her one yet, Dad. I wanted you to name her.'

'Then it shall be Ellie, after you,' I said proudly. I placed a gentle finger against the tiny cheek. 'Don't worry, little Ellie,' I crooned, 'Grandad is home now to take care of you and Mummy. There's nothing more to worry about.'

Very soon after, Tom came home from work. He grinned when he saw me in my favourite armchair. 'Hallo, how long have they let you out for this time? And where's your keeper?' He guffawed heartily at his cruel humour.

'Don't you dare speak to my Dad like that!' snapped Ellie, flushing, 'You know that he's only been ill, and nobody can help that!' Ellie must really have loved me to have defied Tom Forbes in that way.

He glared for a moment, and then laughed again. 'Five fucking years in a loony bin, and you say he's only been ill. Christ! It runs in the family. Now get me some dinner and lay out some clean clothes for me. I'm off out for the night, and you can expect me when you see me.'

Hoping to placate him, I said, 'I'm sure you must be proud of your little daughter, Tom. She's a beautiful baby.'

'Oh, shit, not you too. You pair and your precious baby make

me want to bloody spew. I just dunno how you keep getting out, and why she hasn't been put away before now.'

Can you understand my sweet Ellie having endured that all those years? The man was an insensitive boor. I remember hoping then that he would desert us for his lady friend, in exactly the way my wife had left me, so that Ellie and I could be at peace with our lovely baby.

Still, the atmosphere was much better when he had taken himself off. Ellie and I washed up together, and I noticed then that Tom's set of butcher tools were still there in the kitchen, deadly sharp as always. Then we sat and talked for a while until Ellie said, 'Why, baby is crying. She must be hungry at last.'

I hadn't noticed the wails until Ellie mentioned them. Then I heard them, loud and clear. My, but she had a healthy set of lungs, that grandchild of mine.

We prepared the baby's bottle, then we fed, bathed and changed her. I just cannot describe the pride I felt. Little Ellie was a fine child. Her eyes were bright blue, her hair dark brown, and her limbs were strong and sturdy. I like to think that she took to me immediately, for when I held her in my arms the lusty bellows died away, to be replaced by a low cooing noise.

These last few weeks, Ellie and baby and I have made life bearable for each other. As for my son-in-law, he became more surly and unpleasant each day, although fortunately we saw little of him. When he was there, he generally confined his conversation to demands for food, or to gratuitous insults, such as 'right pair of fucking nutters' and similar remarks. At times he even dropped the odd, veiled threat towards the baby, and I think it must have been these which caused Ellie to become so horrifyingly ill. I tried my best to warn Tom, I tried to tell him to say what he liked about us but to leave the baby alone. All he said was, 'You're both fucking barmy. I just don't know which is the worst.'

If only we could turn back the clock. A cliché, yes, but a heart-felt one. What would I do if I could turn the clock back to, say, the day before yesterday? Perhaps take Ellie and the baby away from that flat . . . Or perhaps try to persuade Tom Forbes to go to his lady friend and not return, ever . . . Too late, too late . . .

As usual, Tom Forbes had his dinner last night and then went

out to pass the evening in his own way. Carousing and fornicating, no doubt. Ellie and I had a nice evening. We bathed and fed little Ellie, and played with her for a while before tucking her up for the night. Then we watched television, had some Horlicks and went to bed.

It must have been in the early hours of this morning that I was awoken by raised voices in the next bedroom. It took some time for anything to filter through my sleep-fogged senses, and then I realized that after months of leaving her be, Tom Forbes was demanding his marital rights from Ellie. I heard him yell something like, 'What you need is a good stiff prick, you stupid bitch! Maybe that'll bring you to your senses, what you ever had of them!' Then I heard Ellie begging him to stop, and she was crying out, 'You'll wake the baby! you'll wake the baby!'

Then I realized that the baby had been woken, for the poor love was crying her eyes out. I ran to the cradle and picked her up. As always, my touch did the trick, and little Ellie settled down.

Tom's voice was still dominating the quarrel next door, and he bellowed, 'Fuck the baby! I'm going next door right now to smash that fucking baby, and if that crazy old man of yours gets in the way, then I'll bloody smash him, too!'

There was the sound of a door being wrenched open, and Ellie's shrieks of anguish. It was then that the hazy mist filled my head, only this time my mind did not become blank, not in the expected way. This time it was as if I detached myself from myself. There was the me huddled in the bedroom clutching the baby, and there was the me beyond, aware of some wickedness through the door and into the flat. And the two me's were tormented and gleeful.

I had heard the ripping open of the door, then there was a disgusting, grunting noise, liquid in its impact. I felt, rather than heard, the curious dragging, after which there commenced a low and terrifying giggling which filled my senses for a long time. The giggling was supplemented by other, rather *horrible* noises.

The haze dispersed and I was in my room cuddling the child. The flat was quiet. Becoming frightened, I switched on my bedside lamp. A thin glistening line of something had crept beneath my door. Something red.

I laid the baby back in her cradle and forced myself to creep out into the lounge to investigate. It was in darkness, but sufficient

light shone from my room, and from the kitchen door which was ajar, to show me that something was very wrong. There was a small pool of red outside my door, which narrowed and trailed off towards the kitchen, slug-like. A chair was overturned, a rug crumpled and pushed to one side. I went slowly to the kitchen and touched the door. It swung back slowly and I stepped forward.

I'm not sure if I screamed or not. I think that perhaps I did. The sight in that kitchen was . . . loathsome . . .

Tom's butcher knives were scattered about the floor, and they had been used. The dismembered thing which lay in the centre of the floor could have been part of a butcher's display, except that in a butcher's shop you do not see the blood . . . or the entrails . . . So much blood . . . the room was awash with it. Splashes on the walls . . . rivulets running from the sink, and down the stove . . . all the surfaces . . .

As I stood there, helpless, gazing at that unspeakable travesty of a human being, I heard a little snigger behind me. Again, I think that I must have screamed as I turned to . . . my Ellie.

She was naked and liberally splattered with blood, and in one of her hands was a huge knife. In the other she held the head. Her face was distorted by an insane rictus. We stared at each other for a moment and then she said, matter-of-factly, 'I won't let you hurt my baby, I won't,' and she came at me with the knife.

My mind became a throbbing whirlpool of mist. I still retain odd images. Ellie. Soundless shrieks from a gaping mouth. Gouts of scarlet. Horror.

I think I must have tried to defend myself. I did defend myself, I'm sure, for when I became conscious again I had a meat cleaver in my hand, and Ellie . . . oh, Ellie . . .

I was jerked from the shattering sight by the sound of the baby crying. I was all that she had now. I dropped the cleaver and rescued little Ellie from the cradle and soothed her.

I was still sitting in a corner, soothing my lovely, when two police officers broke their way into the flat. They were young men, and what they saw in the kitchen distressed them greatly. They called into their headquarters for aid.

And all the time I sat and nursed my granddaughter. She was very good, only whimpering a little from time to time. I loved that baby

An elderly sergeant was among those who came later. He sat and talked to me while the others did what had to be done in the kitchen. I told him all the events of the night, and he listened with great interest, nodding from time to time.

When I had finished, he said, 'Well, at least your grandchild is safe, and we'll arrange for her to be well looked after. May I hold her, please?' I wouldn't have let just anybody handle her, you understand, but he seemed a kindly man and he couldn't have been too many years younger than myself.

'Be careful,' I admonished as I passed the baby into his arms, 'I've managed to get her off to sleep now, and I don't want her to be disturbed.'

The sergeant was very gentle as he took the child, and just as gentle when he unfolded the blanket in which I had wrapped her. Then his face hardened, became stiff and formal. He turned to one of the constables and ordered, 'Get the surgeon in here, will you.'

That's when the pain in my head made me scream and the mists began to close in oh so fast and two brawny constables were holding me down and the police surgeon was injecting something – some noxious thing – into my arm and all that I could see was that sergeant holding the stiffening body of my granddaughter towards me and all I could hear was his voice as from an immense distance shouting at me what do you mean baby granddaughter this is not a baby this is only a life-sized china doll . . .

Ken Johns

Mumsy and Sonny

A distressed cry from the hill got lost in the throb and clatter that came to meet it from below.

Circus was in town, and fairground too with strident music call. Its raucous blare nostalgic to those past growing up, who suffered gladly the assault upon their ears, and believed its vulgar authenticity . . .

*but in truth the brassy discord was persuaded not by steam,
but by electric pulses that did recreate the theme.*

It had become the real thing. And the real thing was elsewhere; in candyfloss and big dipper, in target shoots and moon rides, in roll a dime and helter skelter.

And 'roll-up' cries invited from the booths. And trade was hustled on all sides and money passed from hand to hand, and bodies jostled. And children's faces shone with hopeful curiosity, nudging close to painted ladies who had hopes of rich rewards, among the crowds. And brash lights killed the dark with colour on a sway of faces . . .

*and shrieks of happy fear marked painted cars that spun and dived,
and stomachs churned within them to give full value from the rides.*

'I want someone to play with, Mumsy. When do I get to play again?' He nestled a head into the other and pleaded with petulant motion of face against thick tweed.

Mumsy reached down to pat the tousled head with an indulgent smile. 'You played with someone already, Sonny. My how you played.'

'But there are lots more at the circus.'

Mumsy nodded, conveying grim acknowledgement behind a black veil. 'Lots more, Sonny.'

'Can we go back again, Mumsy? Back to the circus?'

'We can't ever go back again, Sonny. Not since that bad day. Everything's changed now. You know that.'

'I know that.' Sonny pulled his head away and looked down to the circus. 'But we're better now. Your face and my leg.'

'Makes no difference. They blamed us. They finished us. They. Rotten apples to be squeezed. No, we can't go back again, Sonny. Except – maybe for quick little visits.'

'Like tonight? To play?'

Smiles passed between them and Sonny stroked Headless Doll.

'Yes, Sonny. We'll go back to play.'

Sonny nursed Headless Doll and murmured at it, 'Maybe one day I can find a head for you, and maybe some golden hair too.'

They sat a while longer on the dark hill, looking down, saying nothing, troubled. They looked down into a cauldron that bubbled with life to overwhelm the senses; with sight, lightflashed, arc-pierced and strung with primary coloured lamps; and sound, with bells and whistles and hooters and shrill cries of the young; and smell, of diesel and hamburger and hot dog that visited the throng from all directions, and . . .

*the slow churning of the people seeing things that must be seen,
were hazed by constant movement and by the smoke and steam.*

Behind was Big Top. Close by, Caged Tigress who had never walked on earth, prowled and marked a sad domain that would never be invaded. A thousand familiar scents confused its jaded sense of smell, and caused an angry roar that went unheeded by a quicker movement near Big Top.

And a police siren sliced through all the pleasure noises.

Sonny squeezed his legs and giggled. 'Isn't it exciting, Mumsey. The police are coming. They always come.'

Mumsey hugged him, eyes bright behind the veil. 'It's because of you, Sonny. Always because of you. It's because you play with people.'

It triggered a response that turned Sonny to touch the face of Ringmaster on the grass behind them. It was already cold, mouth open and eyes staring, neck bruised.

Sonny frowned. 'They don't play for long though. Mumsey, why don't they play for long?'

Mumsey smoothed the hair off Sonny's face. 'You play so rough. Aren't I always saying that – how you play so rough? You're strong, Sonny. They laugh at you but you're awful strong.'

'And you're strong too, Mumsy.'

'We're both strong. We got to be strong together.'

'Ringmaster was bad. Mumsy, wasn't he bad?'

'Yes, Sonny. He was real bad.'

'And he shouldn't have sent us away like he did.'

Mumsy shook a serious head. 'No, he shouldn't have sent us away like that. That was wrong. It spoiled everything.'

'And now we can't ever go back, can we, Mumsy?'

'Maybe one day, when all the bad ones are gone.'

'Do we get to play again, Mumsy?' Sonny's eyes shone. 'Do we get to play with more people? *Please*, Mumsy.'

'Sure we will, Sonny, You'll see.'

Sonny grew tired of touching Ringmaster's dead face and turned away to cup his chin in hands. 'It was nice of Ringmaster to come up here and visit with us and play. Wasn't that nice, Mumsy?'

'Silly boy. He didn't come up to meet *us*. He wouldn't do that after he sent us away. I had to be a little sneaky. I had to hide High Wire Girl. She had to be taken to the trees and made safe with rope and tape. Mumsy did that little chore while you were asleep.'

Sonny frowned again and the shadows were unkind, to his face. 'But Ringmaster was awful sweet on her?'

'That's right, Sonny. That's why I did it, so he couldn't find her, and I could send a message that she was waiting up here.'

'You're real smart, Mumsy.'

'We got to be smart.'

'But High Wire Girl will tell on us. Girls always tell.'

A slight tremble disturbed the tweed-clad figure. The heavy features clamped tight behind the veil. A hand gripped Sonny's shoulder with a force that made him wince. When the voice came it was deeper yet than normal, and normal was already deep. 'I'd almost forgotten High Wire Girl. Thank you, Sonny.'

Sonny beat his fists upon his knees. 'I could *play* with her, Mumsy. I *could*, I *could*.'

A theatrical shock was laced with tolerance. 'Sonny, I do declare! Playing twice in one night! And at this hour, when you should be sleeping and getting your rest.'

'But girls are easy and quick to play with. And I've never played with a girl yet. Oh let me. Please, please, *please*.'

Mumsy stood and reached down for a hand. 'Perhaps you

should. Perhaps it's for the best. After all, she always sided with Ringmaster. And it *was* her wire that lashed us both, after she fell and strained the pegs, and complaining we distracted her.'

As they neared the approach road to the circus they saw a blanket-covered stretcher wheeled towards an ambulance.

'Mumsy,' Sonny whispered. 'Look, they found Old Clown. Oh, this is *fun*. It's just like hide-and-seek.'

'Hush Sonny.'

'Hey, you. Hold it right there.' Patrolman swung a spotlight.

They cringed and lowered their heads as white beam sought them out.

'Who are yuh? Where yuh been? Where yuh going?'

*Sonny did a lovely mime and Mumsy helped him too,
and Patrolman stood there watching and thought he really knew.*

'Are you circus people?' Patrolman squinted closer, ending his inspection with facial distaste. 'Yeah, guess you are at that. Okay, go on back to your caravan and keep outa dark places. Some kinda maniac on the loose tonight. Someone'll wanna talk to yuh later.'

Sonny limped and Mumsy dipped a veiled head, both leaving hand in hand till darkness swallowed the oddly proportioned pair.

Patrolman spat on the ground and said in their direction, 'Fucking creeps.'

Mumsy and Sonny were smiling again when they reached High Wire Girl and together freed her from the tree, alive. With a gag in her mouth and her wrists still bound, Mumsy plucked her from the ground and carried her deeper into the wood. Sonny moved with short hopping run alongside the swinging stride of Mumsy. He . . .

*ran close to where High Wire Girl's inverted head did hang,
and he showed between his lips a saliva-covered fang.*

Her hair fanned down below stark eyes. And against her throat Sonny jammed Headless Doll and regarded the result, unsure. But the hair shone to his liking, though too pale by far to suit.

Mumsy laid High Wire Girl down and stood back to rest. Breathing a heavy chorus with the wind that came to animate the branches in rustling protest but alarming not Sonny, as he knelt by the girl clasping hands to his cheeks; a pleasing picture of birthday boy beholding a hardly-dared-hoped-for present.

'She is *so* pretty, Mumsy. Mumsy, isn't she pretty?'

'She's pretty.'

Sonny pulled Headless Doll from his pocket. 'My doll wasn't pretty. That's why I pulled her head off. Some day I'll find another head. Another head with maybe golden hair.'

'Sure you will, Sonny. Tell me, what kind of head would you really like?'

Sonny blushed and touched the veil. 'Maybe just like yours, Mumsy.'

Mumsy hugged him tight. 'That's a beautiful thing to say. Thank you, Sonny.'

Then Sonny reached a hand to High Wire Girl's hair and she winced with her eyes. 'It's stuck, Mumsy. Her hair's stuck.'

'It's real hair, that's why.'

'It's real hair. I like real hair best of all. Maybe it *will* come off?'

'Real hair won't come off, not easy. You know that.'

Sonny pulled open High Wire Girl's wrap. 'Look, she got no clothes on.'

'She was going to take a shower, I guess.'

Sonny nodded happily. 'I used to give Headless Doll a bath. I'd hold her under and squeeze and bubbles came out of her eyes. It was *fun*.'

Mumsy smiled fondly at him. 'My, you do like to play so.'

'Can I keep her, Mumsy? Can I keep her, please? Maybe there's a way her hair will come off. Or I could give her a bath and watch the bubbles come out of her eyes.'

Mumsy shook a head. 'She's too big, Sonny. Far too big to take along. And she'll scream and run away. She's trouble.'

'That's a real shame,' Sonny intoned sorrowfully. 'She's too big. But she's soft, and won't hurt my teeth and fingers. Look, Mumsy, see how soft she is, all over.'

'She's real, Sonny, that's why. But you must cover her again. It isn't right you should be looking and touching.'

'Yes, Mumsy.'

'And we must hurry along now. They'll be coming soon.'

Sonny gazed regretful at High Wire Girl. Then he smiled his look back up to the brooding heaviness of Mumsy. 'Now, Mumsy?'

The veil was sucked into the gap of mouth with an intake of air,

then out again as gentle as the words. 'All right, Sonny. But be quick now.'

Sonny straddled High Wire Girl with his knees and took her by the throat. Her eyes stretched wide, as stubby fingers pressed with strength disproportionate with his size. When he grew tired of playing he got to his feet and looked at his clawed hands, chuckling.

Mumsy hugged him briefly. 'You're *such* a help in these busy times.'

'Make her promise she won't tell now, Mumsy. Make her promise, just in case.'

'Very well.'

Mumsy took High Wire Girl by the neck and lifted her upright and clear of the ground, then jerked away with a sharp flexing of wrist that caused a muffled snap between the hands. 'There, she's promised now. Come quickly now Sonny. We have a long way to travel – all the way to Fairmont.'

'Is that where the circus is going next, Mumsy?'

'To Fairmont.'

'And do I get to play again?'

'Sure you do. You're a good boy.'

A reduced charge was made by the circus in Fairmont, reflecting the depletion of the acts, some by desertion. For not all replacements did respond, not being reassured that death had struck a hundred miles away and only in that one place. But the wily Fortune Teller made a proclamation that she had foreseen, and that it was not yet over. So her queue predictably lengthened and she alone made profit from past terror.

It was night.

The canvas tops stretched tight from recent rain, and dust was taken to the ground and mixed with earth that lightly made a mushy mould from the horde of wandering footsteps, that had come to see the show. And lamps were dark, as the night that crept in, unopposed. Dust sheets clothed the carriages and silence clothed all else. The circus slept, but one.

Caged Tigress shook its coat and pawed the boards, instincts sharp. Its hollow stomach sought attention but there was no trail to follow, and no game to stalk, till . . .

*it flattened, sensing movement, and its nostrils flared out wide.
Then it quivered, digging claws and its growl stayed deep inside.*

'It's Sheba.' Sonny approached the cage.
Mumsy joined him. 'She's a fine, big cat.'
'And hungry.'

'Wouldn't it be nice, Sonny, if we fed her?'

'Mmm, that's a real nice idea. Who shall we let Sheba play with?'

Mumsy winked beneath the veil. 'You *know* who it should be.'

Sonny hugged himself, excited. 'Of course!'

Lion Tamer was snoring until Mumsy struck. They took him back to the cage where Mumsy ripped off the lock on the rear half of the cage with an iron lever. Together Mumsy and Sonny slid Lion Tamer inside and Mumsy closed the door and pinned it with the lever. Then Sonny, hardly able to keep a serious face, tugged a ringed handle that opened a grille dividing the cage.

Sheba padded through with swish of tail and curl of lip. Sniffed around Lion Tamer, puzzled by the movement of his rib cage and slight twitch of leg. Her meat had never moved before. Caged Tigress squatted leisurely, drew Lion Tamer closer with her paws, began to eat.

Sonny took Mumsy's hand and tiptoed away. 'Mumsy, can I play with the clowns now? I *like* clowns.'

A lion tried a sleepy roar, smelling meat. A low ripple of throaty noise passed around the menagerie and it was quiet again. Save for the rustle of flag and flap of bunting in the busy night air. Save for the contented crushing of bone. Save for the one cough from Lanky Clown during his last minute alive as he stared at Sonny's bulging eyes and pink nose . . .

*and a face that to the looker was one who had met age,
and the rubber smile presented did conceal an inner rage.*

Mumsy broke Catcher's back across a strong knee, and pushed him warm between the bars of Lion's cage.

The big cats ate and the circus slept, as Mumsy and Sonny crept into Elephant Girl's caravan and scuffed a way through discarded harem costumes of the three who shared. There was at first surprise and noise, that caused the two who visited to pant and rasp their breath as they quickly played till quietness came.

Sonny found some fine wigs and other costumes and wished they would fit Headless Doll. But he was happy just the same because he had four dolls to play with now. So he took off their clothes and

tried different wigs, and he dressed one as a dancer, another in a ballerina skirt, another in silk, and so on. Mumsy helped and gave advice. But Sonny noticed that nearly all had messed themselves when he'd played with their necks. So he undressed them all again and fixed them nice with diapers made from strips of sheet. And then he noticed – *that there was one with golden hair.*

'Come away now, Sonny.'

'Please. Let me stay awhile. I want to play a little longer. It's important.'

'We have to go. And there is Sword-swallower and Juggler to visit.'

'You play with them, Mumsy. You play. I want to stay and do a secret thing. A little longer – *please!*'

'Very well. Just a little longer. But you come soon.'

And when he did he carried in his hand a small canvas grip, and his hand was dripped in blood.

When the police allowed, Circus Boss took what was left of his circus and fair and convoyed west for two hundred miles. It was his fervent hope that sheer distance would free them from the savagery that had struck, back there.

But Mumsy and Sonny, with cunning guile, had already gotten a forward mailing address and were waiting . . .

*on the very edge of town, on an expanse of wasted ground,
where agent's posters told of circus coming down.*

Sergeant Cop answered a nose itch with a rub of ham fist and stared at Rookie Cop. 'Where'd you say you seen 'em?'

'Way over there, out back, through the buildings by the old runway. Old lady, heavy dressed, and a kid.'

Sergeant Cop grunted. 'You stay tight. I'll go whistle up some fire power.'

Rookie Cop tried to make his laugh sarcastic but it came like a giggle. 'For a dame and a kid? Aw, shit, Sarge. I'll have their asses outa there in five flat.'

Sergeant Cop gave his nose some peace and rubbed over a stomach ulcer. 'Listen, green ears. If that's who I think it is then that ain't no dame and that ain't no kid.'

'A couple of weirdie kooks?'

7 Sergeant Cop shook his head a few times then let it drop like it was too heavy and he was too tired to lift it up. 'And they ain't no fucking pansies either. They'd use your ass hole for an ash tray. The small one – circus midget – that's what. Had a clown act with the other guy who also did a strong man act. There was some kind of an accident and these two got slashed around with steel ropes breaking loose, then they got kicked out. Some say the ringmaster fucked up the acts with an overlap. Some say these two scrambled their marbles for good. Some say there's a cure for stomach ulcers but it sure ain't reached my guts yet.'

Caring nothing for the ulcer, Rookie Cop said, 'So these two should be in the loony bin?'

'They were. Then we got around to checking – gone. So someone at PDHQ got off his ass for long enough to check reports. An old lady and a kid were seen dropping off the wall of the nut house. And a woman and a kid were seen around the circus every time something happened.'

'Shit!'

'So like I said – sit tight. Watch. I'll go call in.'

When Sergeant Cop was out of sight, Rookie Cop said with scorn, 'Fairy ass. You're getting too old for the job, Sarge. Spooked by a couple of circus freaks turned shrink cases. I'll have 'em cuffed and waiting time you get back.'

Behind the sagging wall of storeroom was where Rookie Cop saw him. Sonny was squatting on the ground and playing five-stones, hair blowing wild around a face, unseen.

'Hey, kid,' Rookie Cop called and grinned and wondered if he should go kick his ass, forgetting.

'Hi,' Sonny called back, dropping the stones and holding the grip. 'You come to play?'

'You like to play?'

'I like to play with people best of all. I never played with a cop before.'

When Sonny turned a little and showed gargoyle face, the Rookie Cop contracted and stepped back a cautious pace.

'I gotta take you in, fella.'

'Mumsy won't like that.'

'Mumsy? Oh yeah. Where is that other freak?'

'Right behind you. This is *fun*.'

Mumsy struck. Rookie Cop sailed forward, on to the waiting fingers of Sonny, who played with all his strength.

Sonny walked a few paces with the canvas grip and pulled Headless Doll from his pocket.

‘What do you have in the bag, Sonny?’

‘A secret.’

‘Why – Sonny. *We* don’t have secrets.’

‘I got one.’

‘But we shouldn’t. We really shouldn’t. Not from each other.’

‘I just got this one secret.’

‘Tell me, Sonny.’

‘It’s just part of what I want. I’ll get the other part real soon. You’ll be pleased. I *know*.’

The gaunt figure shook. ‘Sonny, I shall be angry.’

‘Okay, come and see then. You have to kneel close. Now, close your eyes tight. This is *fun*.’

Sonny opened the bag and took out a stained machete knife.

When Sergeant Cop and three patrolmen came around the corner they saw Sonny sat cross-legged in the dust. He cradled Headless Doll in his arms. And it was stuck into the ragged neck of Mumsy’s head, and around it fell the bloodied golden hair of Elephant Girl.

Stephen King

Graveyard shift

Two a.m., Friday.

Hall was sitting on the bench by the elevator, the only place on the third floor where a working joe could catch a smoke, when Warwick came up. He wasn't happy to see Warwick. The foreman wasn't supposed to show up on three during the graveyard shift; he was supposed to stay down in his office in the basement drinking coffee from the urn that stood on the corner of his desk. Besides, it was hot.

It was the hottest June on record in Gates Falls, and the Orange Crush thermometer which was also by the elevator had once rested at 94 degrees at three in the morning. God only knew what kind of hellhole the mill was on the three-to-eleven shift.

Hall worked the picker machine, a balky gadget manufactured by a defunct Cleveland firm in 1934. He had only been working in the mill since April, which meant he was still making minimum \$1.78 an hour, which was still all right. No wife, no steady girl, no alimony. He was a drifter, and during the last three years he had moved on his thumb from Berkeley (college student) to Lake Tahoe (busboy) to Galveston (stevedore) to Miami (short-order cook) to Wheeling (taxi driver and dishwasher) to Gates Falls, Maine (picker machine operator). He didn't figure on moving again until the snow fell. He was a solitary person and he liked the hours from eleven to seven when the blood flow of the big mill was at its coolest, not to mention the temperature.

The only thing he did not like was the rats.

The third floor was long and deserted, lit only by the sputtering glow of the fluorescents. Unlike the other levels of the mill, it was relatively silent and unoccupied – at least by the humans. The rats were another matter. The only machine on three was the picker; the rest of the floor was storage for the ninety-pound bags of fibre which had yet to be sorted by Hall's long gear-toothed machine.

They were stacked like link sausages in long rows, some of them (especially the discontinued meltons and irregular slipes for which there were no orders) years old and dirty grey with industrial wastes. They made fine nesting places for the rats, huge, fat-bellied creatures with rabid eyes and bodies that jumped with lice and vermin.

Hall had developed a habit of collecting a small arsenal of soft-drink cans from the trash barrel during his break. He pegged them at the rats during times when work was slow, retrieving them later at his leisure. Only this time Mr Foreman had caught him, coming up the stairs instead of using the elevator like the sneaky sonofabitch everyone said he was.

‘What are you up to, Hall?’

‘The rats,’ Hall said, realizing how lame that must sound now that all the rats had snuggled safely back into their houses. ‘I peg cans at ’em when I see ’em.’

Warwick nodded once, briefly. He was a big beefy man with a crew cut. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and his tie was pulled down. He looked at Hall closely. ‘We don’t pay you to chuck cans at rats, mister. Not even if you pick them up again.’

‘Harry hasn’t sent down an order for twenty minutes,’ Hall answered, thinking: *Why couldn’t you stay the hell put and drink your coffee?* ‘I can’t run it through the picker if I don’t have it.’

Warwick nodded as if the topic no longer interested him.

‘Maybe I’ll take a walk up and see Wisconsky,’ he said. ‘Five to one he’s reading a magazine while the crap piles up in his bins.’

Hall didn’t say anything.

Warwick suddenly pointed. ‘There’s one! Get the bastard!’

Hall fired the Nehi can he had been holding with one whistling, overhand motion. The rat, which had been watching them from atop one of the fabric bags with its bright buckshot eyes, fled with one faint squeak. Warwick threw back his head and laughed as Hall went after the can.

‘I came to see you about something else,’ Warwick said.

‘Is that so?’

‘Next week’s fourth of July week,’ Hall nodded. The mill would be shut down Monday to Saturday – vacation week for men with at least one year’s tenure. Layoff week for men with less than a year. ‘You want to work?’

Hall shrugged. 'Doing what?'

'We're going to clean the whole basement level. Nobody's touched it for twelve years. Helluva mess. We're going to use hoses.'

'The town zoning committee getting on the board of directors?'

Warwick looked steadily at Hall. 'You want it or not? Two an hour, double time on the fourth. We're working the graveyard shift because it'll be cooler.'

Hall calculated. He could clear maybe seventy-five bucks after taxes. Better than the goose egg he had been looking forward to.

'All right.'

'Report down by the dye house next Monday.'

Hall watched him as he started back to the stairs. Warwick paused halfway there and turned back to look at Hall. 'You used to be a college boy, didn't you?'

Hall nodded.

'Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.'

He left. Hall sat down and lit another smoke, holding a soda can in one hand and watching for the rats. He could just imagine how it would be in the basement – the subbasement, actually, a level below the dye house. Damp, dark, full of spiders and rotten cloth and ooze from the river – and rats. Maybe even bats, the aviators of the rodent family. *Gah.*

Hall threw the can hard, then smiled thinly to himself as the faint sound of Warwick's voice came down through the overhead ducts, reading Harry Wisconsky the riot act.

Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.

He stopped smiling abruptly and butted his smoke. A few moments later Wisconsky started to send rough nylon down through the blowers, and Hall went to work. And after a while the rats came out and sat atop the bags at the back of the long room watching him with their unblinking black eyes. They looked like a jury.

Eleven p.m., Monday.

There were about thirty-six men sitting around when Warwick came in wearing a pair of old jeans tucked into high rubber boots. Hall had been listening to Harry Wisconsky, who was enormously fat, enormously lazy, and enormously gloomy.

'It's gonna be a mess,' Wisconsky was saying when Mr Foreman

came in. 'You wait and see, we're all gonna go home blacker'n midnight in Persia.'

'Okay!' Warwick said. 'We strung sixty lightbulbs down there, so it should be bright enough for you to see what you're doing. You guys' – he pointed to a bunch of men that had been leaning against the drying spools – 'I want you to hook up the hoses over there to the main water conduit by the stairwell. You can unroll them down the stairs. We got about eighty yards for each man, and that should be plenty. Don't get cute and spray one of your buddies or you'll send him to the hospital. They pack a wallop.'

'Somebody'll get hurt,' Wisconsky prophesied sourly. 'Wait and see.'

'You other guys,' Warwick said pointing to the group that Hall and Wisconsky were a part of. 'You're the crap crew tonight. You go in pairs with an electric wagon for each team. There's old office furniture, bags of cloth, hunks of busted machinery, you name it. We're gonna pile it by the airshaft at the west end. Anyone who doesn't know how to run a wagon?'

No one raised a hand. The electric wagons were battery-driven contraptions like miniature dump trucks. They developed a nauseating stink after continual use that reminded Hall of burning power lines.

'Okay,' Warwick said. 'We got the basement divided up into sections, and we'll be done by Thursday. Friday we'll chain-hoist the crap out. Questions?'

There were none. Hall studied the foreman's face closely, and he had a sudden premonition of a strange thing coming. The idea pleased him. He did not like Warwick very much.

'Fine,' Warwick said. 'Let's get at it.'

Two a.m., Tuesday.

Hall was bushed and very tired of listening to Wisconsky's steady patter of profane complaints. He wondered if it would do any good to belt Wisconsky. He doubted it. It would just give Wisconsky something else to bitch about.

Hall had known it would be bad, but this was murder. For one thing, he hadn't anticipated the smell. The polluted stink of the river, mixed with the odour of decaying fabric, rotting masonry, vegetable matter. In the far corner, where they had begun, Hall

discovered a colony of huge white toadstools poking their way up through the shattered cement. His hands had come in contact with them as he pulled and yanked at a rusty gear-toothed wheel, and they felt curiously warm and bloated, like the flesh of a man afflicted with dropsy.

The bulbs couldn't banish the twelve-year darkness; it could only push it back a little and cast a sickly yellow glow over the whole mess. The place looked like the shattered nave of a desecrated church, with its high ceiling and mammoth discarded machinery that they would never be able to move, its wet walls overgrown with patches of yellow moss, and the atonal choir that was the water from the hoses, running in the half-clogged sewer network that eventually emptied into the river below the falls.

And the rats – huge ones that made those on third look like dwarfs. God knew what they were eating down here. They were continually overturning boards and bags to reveal huge nests of shredded newspaper, watching with atavistic loathing as the pups fled into the cracks and crannies, their eyes huge and blind with the continuous darkness.

'Let's stop for a smoke,' Wisconsky said. He sounded out of breath, but Hall had no idea why; he had been goldbricking all night. Still, it was about that time, and they were currently out of sight of everyone else.

'All right.' He leaned against the edge of the electric wagon and lit up.

'I never should've let Warwick talk me into this,' Wisconsky said dolefully. 'This ain't work for a *man*. But he was mad the other night when he caught me in the crapper up on four with my pants up. Christ, was he mad!'

Hall said nothing. He was thinking about Warwick, and about the rats. Strange, how the two things seemed tied together. The rats seemed to have forgotten all about men in their long stay under the mill; they were impudent and hardly afraid at all. One of them had sat up on its hind legs like a squirrel until Hall had gotten in kicking distance, and then it had launched itself at his boot, biting at the leather. Hundreds, maybe thousands. He wondered how many varieties of disease they were carrying around in this black sump-hole. And Warwick. Something about him—

'I need the money,' Wisconsky said. 'But Christ Jesus, buddy,

this ain't no work for a *man*. Those rats.' He looked around fearfully. 'It almost seems like they think. You ever wonder how it'd be, if we was little and they were big—'

'Oh, shut up,' Hall said.

Wisconsky looked at him, wounded. 'Say, I'm sorry, buddy. It's just that . . .' He trailed off. 'Jesus, this place stinks!' he cried. 'This ain't no kind of *work for a man*!' A spider crawled off the edge of the wagon and scrambled up his arm. He brushed it off with a choked sound of disgust.

'Come on,' Hall said, snuffing his cigarette. 'The faster, the quicker.'

'I suppose,' Wisconsky said miserably. 'I suppose.'

Four a.m., Tuesday.

Lunchtime.

Hall and Wisconsky sat with three or four other men, eating their sandwiches with black hands that not even the industrial detergent could clean. Hall ate looking into the foreman's little glass office. Warwick was drinking coffee and eating cold hamburgers with great relish.

'Ray Upson had to go home,' Charlie Brochu said.

'He puke?' someone asked. 'I almost did.'

'Nuh. Ray'd eat cowflop before he'd puke. Rat bit him.'

Hall looked up thoughtfully from his examination of Warwick. 'Is that so?' he asked.

'Yeah,' Brochu shook his head. 'I was teaming with him. Goddamndest thing I ever saw. Jumped out of a hole in one of those old cloth bags. Must have been big as a cat. Grabbed on to his hand and started chewing.'

'Jee-sus,' one of the men said, looking green.

'Yeah,' Brochu said. 'Ray screamed just like a woman, and I ain't blamin' him. He bled like a pig. Would that thing let go? No sir. I had to belt it three or four times with a board before it would. Ray was just about crazy. He stomped it until it wasn't nothing but a mess of fur. Damndest thing I ever saw. Warwick put a bandage on him and sent him home. Told him to go to the doctor tomorrow.'

'That was big of the bastard,' somebody said.

As if he had heard, Warwick got to his feet in his office, stretched, and then came to the door. 'Time we got back with it.'

The men got to their feet slowly, eating up all the time they possibly could stowing their dinner buckets, getting cold drinks, buying candy bars. Then they started down, heels clanking dispiritedly on the steel grillwork of the stair risers.

Warwick passed Hall, clapping him on the shoulder. 'How's it going, college boy?' He didn't wait for an answer.

'Come on,' Hall said patiently to Wisconsky, who was tying his shoelace. They went downstairs.

Seven a.m., Tuesday.

Hall and Wisconsky walked out together; it seemed to Hall that he had somehow inherited the fat Pole. Wisconsky was almost comically dirty, his fat moon face smeared like that of a small boy who has just been thrashed by the town bully.

There was none of the usual rough banter from the other men, the pulling of shirttails, the cracks about who was keeping Tony's wife warm between the hours of one and four. Nothing but silence and an occasional hawking sound as someone spat on the dirty floor.

'You want a lift?' Wisconsky asked him hesitantly.

'Thanks.'

They didn't talk as they rode up Mill Street and crossed the bridge. They exchanged only a brief word when Wisconsky dropped him off in front of his apartment.

Hall went directly to the shower, still thinking about Warwick, trying to place whatever it was about Mr Foreman that drew him, made him feel that somehow they had become tied together.

He slept as soon as his head hit the pillow, but his sleep was broken and restless: he dreamed of rats.

One a.m., Wednesday.

It was better running the hoses.

They couldn't go in until the crap crews had finished a section, and quite often they were done hosing before the next section was clear - which meant time for a cigarette. Hall worked the nozzle of one of the long hoses and Wisconsky pattered back and forth, unsnagging lengths of the hose, turning the water on and off, moving obstructions.

Warwick was short-tempered because the work was proceeding

slowly. They would never be done by Thursday, the way things were going.

Now they were working on a helter-skelter jumble of nineteenth-century office equipment that had been piled in one corner – smashed rolltop desks, mouldy ledgers, reams of invoices, chairs with broken seats – and it was rat heaven. Scores of them squeaked and ran through the dark and crazy passages that honeycombed the heap, and after two men were bitten, the others refused to work until Warwick sent someone upstairs to get heavy rubberized gloves, the kind usually reserved for the dye-house crew, which had to work with acids.

Hall and Wisconsky were waiting to go in with their hoses when a sandy-haired bullneck named Carmichael began howling curses and backing away, slapping at his chest with his gloved hands.

A huge rat with grey-streaked fur and ugly, glaring eyes had bitten into his shirt and hung there, squeaking and kicking at Carmichael's belly with its back paws. Carmichael finally knocked it away with his fist, but there was a huge hole in his shirt, and a thin line of blood trickled from above one nipple. The anger faded from his face. He turned away and retched.

Hall turned the hose on the rat, which was old and moving slowly, a snatch of Carmichael's shirt still caught in its jaws. The roaring pressure drove it backwards against the wall, where it smashed limply.

Warwick came over, an odd, strained smile on his lips. He clapped Hall on the shoulder. 'Damn sight better than throwing cans at the little bastards, huh, college boy?'

'Some little bastard,' Wisconsky said. 'It's a foot long.'

'Turn that hose over there.' Warwick pointed at the jumble of furniture. 'You guys, get out of the way!'

'With pleasure,' someone muttered.

Carmichael charged up to Warwick, his face sick and twisted. 'I'm gonna have compensation for this! I'm gonna—'

'Sure,' Warwick said, smiling. 'You got bit on the titty. Get out of the way before you get pasted down by this water.'

Hall pointed the nozzle and let it go. It hit with a white explosion of spray, knocking over a desk and smashing two chairs to splinters. Rats ran everywhere, bigger than any Hall had ever seen. He could hear men crying out in disgust and horror as they fled things with

huge eyes and sleek, plump bodies. He caught a glimpse of one that looked as big as a healthy six-week puppy. He kept on until he could see no more, then shut the nozzle down.

'Okay!' Warwick called. 'Let's pick it up!'

'I didn't hire out as no exterminator!' Cy Ippeston called mutinously. Hall had tipped a few with him the week before. He was a young guy, wearing a smut-stained baseball cap and a T-shirt.

'That you, Ippeston?' Warwick asked genially.

Ippeston looked uncertain, but stepped forward. 'Yeah. I don't want no more of these rats. I hired to clean up, not to maybe get rabies or typhoid or somethin'. Maybe you best count me out.'

There was a murmur of agreement from the others. Wisconsky stole a look at Hall, but Hall was examining the nozzle of the hose he was holding. It had a bore like a .45 and could probably knock a man twenty feet.

'You saying you want to punch your clock, Cy?'

'Thinkin' about it,' Ippeston said.

Warwick nodded. 'Okay. You and anybody else that wants. But this ain't no unionized shop, and never has been. Punch out now and you'll never punch back in. I'll see to it.'

'Aren't you some hot ticket,' Hall muttered.

Warwick swung around. 'Did you say something, college boy?'

Hall regarded him blandly. 'Just clearing my throat, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick smiled. 'Something taste bad to you?'

Hall said nothing.

'All right, let's pick it up!' Warwick bawled.

They went back to work.

Two a.m., Thursday.

Hall and Wisconsky were working with the trucks again, picking up junk. The pile by the west airshaft had grown to amazing proportions, but they were still not half done.

'Happy Fourth,' Wisconsky said when they stopped for a smoke. They were working near the north wall, far from the stairs. The light was extremely dim, and some trick of acoustics made the other men seem miles away.

'Thanks.' Hall dragged on his smoke. 'Haven't seen many rats tonight.'

‘Nobody has,’ Wisconsky said. ‘Maybe they got wise.’

They were standing at the end of a crazy, zigzagging alley formed by piles of old ledgers and invoices, mouldy bags of cloth, and two huge flat looms of ancient vintage. ‘Gah,’ Wisconsky said, spitting. ‘That Warwick—’

‘Where do you suppose all the rats got to?’ Hall asked, almost to himself. ‘Not into the walls—’ He looked at the wet and crumbling masonry that surrounded the huge foundation stones. ‘They’d drown. The river’s saturated everything.’

Something black and flapping suddenly dive-bombed them. Wisconsky screamed and put his hands over his head.

‘A bat,’ Hall said, watching after it as Wisconsky straightened up.

‘A bat! A bat!’ Wisconsky raved. ‘What’s a bat doing in the cellar? They’re supposed to be in trees and under eaves and—’

‘It was a big one,’ Hall said softly. ‘And what’s a bat but a rat with wings?’

‘Jesus,’ Wisconsky moaned. ‘How did it—’

‘Get in? Maybe the same way the rats got out.’

‘What’s going on back there?’ Warwick shouted from somewhere behind them. ‘Where are you?’

‘Don’t sweat it,’ Hall said softly. His eyes gleamed in the dark.

‘Was that you, college boy?’ Warwick called. He sounded closer.

‘It’s okay!’ Hall yelled. ‘I barked my shin!’

Warwick’s short, barking laugh. ‘You want a Purple Heart?’

Wisconsky looked at Hall. ‘Why’d you say that?’

‘Look.’ Hall knelt and lit a match. There was a square in the middle of the wet and crumbling cement. ‘Tap it.’

Wisconsky did. ‘It’s wood.’

Hall nodded. ‘It’s the top of a support. I’ve seen some other ones around here. There’s another level under this part of the basement.’

‘God,’ Wisconsky said with utter revulsion.

Three-thirty a.m., Thursday.

They were in the northeast corner, Ippeston and Brochu behind them with one of the high-pressure hoses, when Hall stopped and pointed at the floor. ‘There I thought we’d come across it.’

There was a wooden trapdoor with a crusted iron ringbolt set near the centre.

He walked back to Ippeston and said, 'Shut it off for a minute.' When the hose was choked to a trickle, he raised his voice to a shout. 'Hey! Hey, Warwick! Better come here a minute!'

Warwick came splashing over, looking at Hall with that same hard smile in his eyes. 'Your shoelace come untied, college boy?'

'Look,' Hall said. He kicked the trapdoor with his foot. 'Subcellar.'

'So what?' Warwick asked. 'This isn't break time, col—'

'That's where your rats are,' Hall said. 'They're breeding down there. Wisconsky and I even saw a bat earlier.'

Some of the other men had gathered around and were looking at the trapdoor.

'I don't care,' Warwick said. 'The job was the basement, not—'

'You'll need about twenty exterminators, trained ones,' Hall was saying. 'Going to cost the management a pretty penny. Too bad.'

Someone laughed. 'Fat chance.'

Warwick looked at Hall as if he were a bug under glass. 'You're really a case, you are,' he said, sounding fascinated. 'Do you think I give a good goddamn how many rats there are under there?'

'I was at the library this afternoon and yesterday,' Hall said. 'Good thing you kept reminding me I was a college boy. I read the town zoning ordinances, Warwick – they were set up in 1911, before this mill got big enough to coopt the zoning board. Know what I found?'

Warwick's eyes were cold. 'Take a walk, college boy. You're fired.'

'I found out,' Hall ploughed on as if he hadn't heard, 'I found out that there is a zoning law in Gates Falls about vermin. You spell that v-e-r-m-i-n, in case you wondered. It means disease-carrying animals such as bats, skunks, unlicensed dogs – and rats. Especially rats. Rats are mentioned fourteen times in two paragraphs, Mr Foreman. So you just keep in mind that the minute I punch out I'm going straight to the town commissioner and tell him what the situation down here is.'

He paused, relishing Warwick's hate-congested face. 'I think that between me, him, and the town committee, we can get an in-

junction slapped on this place. You're going to be shut down a lot longer than just Saturday, Mr Foreman. And I got a good idea what *your* boss is going to say when he turns up. Hope your unemployment insurance is paid up, Warwick.'

Warwick's hands formed into claws. 'You damned snot-nose, I ought to—' He looked down at the trapdoor, and suddenly his smile reappeared. 'Consider yourself rehired, college boy.'

'I thought you might see the light.'

Warwick nodded, the same strange grin on his face. 'You're just so smart. I think maybe you ought to go down there, Hall, so we got somebody with a college education to give us an informed opinion. You and Wisconsky.'

'Not me!' Wisconsky exclaimed. 'Not me, I—'

Warwick looked at him. 'You what?'

Wisconsky shut up.

'Good,' Hall said cheerfully. 'We'll need three flashlights. I think I saw a whole rack of those six-battery jobs in the main office, didn't I?'

'You want to take somebody else?' Warwick asked expansively. 'Sure, pick your man.'

'You,' Hall said gently. The strange expression had come into his face again. 'After all, the management should be represented, don't you think? Just so Wisconsky and I don't see *too* many rats down there?'

Someone (it sounded like Ippeston) laughed loudly.

Warwick looked at the men carefully. They studied the tips of their shoes. Finally he pointed at Brochu. 'Brochu, go up to the office and get three flashlights. Tell the watchman I said to let you in.'

'Why'd you get me into this?' Wisconsky moaned to Hall. 'You know I hate those—'

'It wasn't me,' Hall said, and looked at Warwick.

Warwick looked back at him, and neither would drop his eyes.

Four a.m., Thursday.

Brochu returned with the flashlights. He gave one to Hall, one to Wisconsky, one to Warwick.

'Ippeston! Give the hose to Wisconsky.' Ippeston did so. The nozzle trembled delicately between the Pole's hands.

‘Allright,’ Warwick said to Wisconsky. ‘You’re in the middle. If there are rats, you let them have it.’

Sure, Hall thought. And if there are rats, Warwick won’t see them. And neither will Wisconsky, after he finds an extra ten in his pay envelope.

Warwick pointed at two of the men. ‘Lift it.’

One of them bent over the ringbolt and pulled. For a moment Hall didn’t think it was going to give, and then it yanked free with an odd, crunching snap. The other man put his fingers on the underside to help pull, then withdrew with a cry. His hands were crawling with huge and sightless beetles.

With a convulsive grunt the man on the ringbolt pulled the trap back and let it drop. The underside was black with an odd fungus that Hall had never seen before. The beetles dropped off into the darkness below or ran across the floor to be crushed.

‘Look,’ Hall said.

There was a rusty lock bolted on the underside, now broken. ‘But it shouldn’t be underneath,’ Warwick said. ‘It should be on top. Why—’

‘Lots of reasons,’ Hall said. ‘Maybe so nothing on this side could open it – at least when the lock was new. Maybe so nothing on that side could get up.’

‘But who locked it?’ Wisconsky asked.

‘Ah,’ Hall said mockingly, looking at Warwick. ‘A mystery.’

‘Listen,’ Brochu whispered.

‘Oh, God,’ Wisconsky sobbed. ‘I ain’t going down there!’

It was a soft sound, almost expectant; the whisk and patter of thousands of paws, the squeaking of rats.

‘Could be frogs,’ Warwick said.

Hall laughed aloud.

Warwick shone his light down. A sagging flight of wooden stairs led down to the black stones of the floor beneath. There was not a rat in sight.

‘Those stairs won’t hold us,’ Warwick said with finality.

Brochu took two steps forward and jumped up and down on the first step. It creaked but showed no sign of giving way.

‘I didn’t ask you to do that,’ Warwick said.

‘You weren’t there when that rat bit Ray,’ Brochu said softly.

‘Let’s go,’ Hall said.

Warwick took a last sardonic look around at the circle of men, then walked to the edge with Hall. Wisconsky stepped reluctantly between them. They went down one at a time. Hall, then Wisconsky, then Warwick. Their flashlight beams played over the floor, which was twisted and heaved into a hundred crazy hills and valleys. The hose thumped along behind Wisconsky like a clumsy serpent.

When they got to the bottom, Warwick flashed his light around. It picked out a few rotting boxes, some barrels, little else. The seep from the river stood in puddles that came to ankle depth on their boots.

'I don't hear them anymore,' Wisconsky whispered.

They walked slowly away from the trapdoor, their feet shuffling through the slime. Hall paused and shone his light on a huge wooden box with white letters on it. 'Elias Varney,' he read, '1841. Was the mill here then?'

'No,' Warwick said. 'It wasn't built until 1897. What difference?'

Hall didn't answer. They walked forward again. The sub-cellar was longer than it should have been, it seemed. The stench was stronger, a smell of decay and rot and things buried. And still the only sound was the faint, cavelike drip of water.

'What's that?' Hall asked, pointing his beam at a jut of concrete that protruded perhaps two feet into the cellar. Beyond it, the darkness continued and it seemed to Hall that he could now hear sounds up there, curiously stealthy.

Warwick peered at it. 'It's . . . no, that can't be right.'

'Outer wall of the mill, isn't it? And up ahead . . .'

'I'm going back,' Warwick said, suddenly turning around.

Hall grabbed his neck roughly. 'You're not going anywhere, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick looked up at him, his grin cutting the darkness. 'You're crazy, college boy. Isn't that right? Crazy as a loon.'

'You shouldn't push people, friend. Keep going.'

Wisconsky moaned. 'Hall—'

'Give me that.' Hall grabbed the hose. He let go of Warwick's neck and pointed the hose at his head. Wisconsky turned abruptly and crashed back towards the trapdoor. Hall did not even turn. 'After you, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick stepped forward, walking under the place where the

mill ended above them. Hall flashed his light about, and felt a cold satisfaction – premonition fulfilled. The rats had closed in around them, silent as death. Crowded in, rank on rank. Thousands of eyes looked greedily back at him. In ranks to the wall, some fully as high as a man's shin.

Warwick saw them a moment later and came to a full stop. 'They're all around us, college boy.' His voice was still calm, still in control, but it held a jagged edge.

'Yes,' Hall said. 'Keep going.'

They walked forward, the hose dragging behind. Hall looked back once and saw the rats had closed the aisle behind them and were gnawing at the heavy canvas hosing. One looked up and almost seemed to grin at him before lowering his head again. He could see the bats now, too. They were roosting from the rough-hewn overheads, huge, the size of crows or rooks.

'Look,' Warwick said, centring his beam about five feet ahead.

A skull, green with mould, laughed up at them. Further on Hall could see an ulna, one pelvic wing, part of a ribcage. 'Keep going,' Hall said. He felt something bursting up inside him, something lunatic and dark with colours. *You are going to break before I do, Mr Foreman, so help me God.*

They walked past the bones. The rats were not crowding them; their distances appeared constant. Up ahead Hall saw one cross their path of travel. Shadows hid it, but he caught sight of a pink twitching tail as thick as a telephone cord.

Up ahead the flooring rose sharply, then dipped. Hall could hear a stealthy rustling sound, a big sound. Something that perhaps no living man had ever seen. It occurred to Hall that he had perhaps been looking for something like this through all his days of crazy wandering.

The rats were moving in, creeping on their bellies, forcing them forward. 'Look,' Warwick said coldly.

Hall saw. Something had happened to the rats back here, some hideous mutation that never could have survived under the eye of the sun; nature would have forbidden it. But down here, nature had taken on another ghastly face.

The rats were gigantic, some as high as three feet. But their rear legs were gone and they were blind as moles, like their flying

cousins. They dragged themselves forward with hideous eagerness.

Warwick turned and faced Hall, the smile hanging on by brute willpower. Hall really had to admire him. 'We can't go on, Hall. You must see that.'

'The rats have business with you, I think,' Hall said.

Warwick's control slipped. 'Please,' he said. 'Please.'

Hall smiled. 'Keep going.'

Warwick was looking over his shoulder. 'They're gnawing into the hose. When they get through it, we'll never get back.'

'I know. Keep going.'

'You're insane—' A rat ran across Warwick's shoe and he screamed. Hall smiled and gestured with his light. They were all around, the closest of them less than a foot away now.

Warwick began to walk again. The rats drew back.

They topped the miniature rise and looked down. Warwick reached it first, and Hall saw his face go white as paper. Spit ran down his chin. 'Oh, my God. Dear Jesus.'

And he turned to run.

Hall opened the nozzle of the hose and the high-pressure rush of water struck Warwick squarely on the chest, knocking him back out of sight. There was a long scream that rose over the sound of the water. Thrashing sounds.

'Hall!' Grunts. A huge, tenebrous squeaking that seemed to fill the earth.

'HALL, FOR GOD'S SAKE—'

A sudden wet ripping noise. Another scream, weaker. Something huge shifted and turned. Quite distinctly Hall heard the wet snap that a fractured bone makes.

A legless rat, guided by some bastard form of sonar, lunged against him, biting. Its body was flabby, warm. Almost absently Hall turned the hose on it, knocking it away. The hose did not have quite so much pressure now.

Hall walked to the brow of the wet hill and looked down.

The rat filled the whole gully at the far end of that noxious tomb. It was a huge and pulsating grey, eyeless, totally without legs. When Hall's light struck it, it made a hideous mewling noise. Their queen, then, the *magna mater*. A huge and nameless thing whose progeny

might someday develop wings. It seemed to dwarf what remained of Warwick, but that was probably just illusion. It was the shock of seeing a rat as big as a Holstein calf.

'Goodbye, Warwick,' Hall said. The rat crouched over Mr Foreman jealously, ripping at one limp arm.

Hall turned away and began to make his way back rapidly, halting the rats with his hose, which was growing less and less potent. Some of them got through and attacked his legs above the tops of his boots with biting lunges. One hung stubbornly on at his thigh, ripping at the cloth of his corduroy pants. Hall made a fist and smashed it aside.

He was nearly three-quarters of the way back when the huge whirring filled the darkness. He looked up and the gigantic flying form smashed into his face.

The mutated bats had not lost their tails yet. It whipped around Hall's neck in a loathsome coil and squeezed as the teeth sought the soft spot under his neck. It wriggled and flapped with its membranous wings, clutching the tatters of his shirt for purchase.

Hall brought the nozzle of the hose up blindly and struck at its yielding body again and again. It fell away and he trampled it beneath his feet, dimly aware that he was screaming. The rats ran in a flood over his feet, up his legs.

He broke into a staggering run, shaking some off. The others bit at his belly, his chest. One ran up his shoulder and pressed its questing muzzle into the cup of his ear.

He ran into the second bat. It roosted on his head for a moment, squealing, and then ripped away a flap of Hall's scalp.

He felt his body growing numb. His ears filled with the screech and yammer of many rats. He gave one last heave, stumbled over furry bodies, fell to his knees. He began to laugh, a high, screaming sound.

Five a.m., Thursday.

'Somebody better go down there,' Brochu said tentatively.

'Not me,' Wisconsky whispered. 'Not me.'

'No, not you, jelly belly,' Ippeston said with contempt.

'Well, let's go,' Brogan said, bringing up another hose. 'Me, Ippeston, Dangerfield, Nedeau. Stevenson, go up to the office and get a few more lights.'

Ippeston looked down into the darkness thoughtfully. 'Maybe they stopped for a smoke,' he said. 'A few rats, what the hell.'

Stevenson came back with the lights; a few moments later they started down.

Stephen King

The mangler

Officer Hunton got to the laundry just as the ambulance was leaving – slowly, with no siren or flashing lights. Ominous. Inside, the office was stuffed with milling, silent people, some of them weeping. The plant itself was empty; the big automatic washers at the far end had not even been shut down. It made Hunton very wary. The crowd should be at the scene of the accident, not in the office. It was the way things worked – the human animal had a built-in urge to view the remains. A very bad one, then. Hunton felt his stomach tighten as it always did when the accident was very bad. Fourteen years of cleaning human litter from highways and streets and the sidewalks at the bases of very tall buildings had not been able to erase that little hitch in the belly, as if something evil had clotted there.

A man in a white shirt saw Hunton and walked towards him reluctantly. He was a buffalo of a man with head thrust forwards between shoulders, nose and cheeks vein-broken either from high blood pressure or too many conversations with the brown bottle. He was trying to frame words, but after two tries Hunton cut him off briskly:

‘Are you the owner? Mr Gartley?’

‘No . . . no. I’m Stanner. The foreman. God, this—’

Hunton got out his notebook. ‘Please show me the scene of the accident, Mr Stanner, and tell me what happened.’

Stanner seemed to grow even more white; the blotches on his nose and cheeks stood out like birthmarks. ‘D-do I have to?’

Hunton raised his eyebrows. ‘I’m afraid you do. The call I got said it was serious.’

‘Serious—’ Stanner seemed to be battling with his gorge; for a moment his Adam’s apple went up and down like a monkey on a stick. ‘Mrs Frawley is dead. Jesus I wish Bill Gartley was here.’

‘What happened?’

Stanner said, ‘You better come over here.’

He led Hunton past a row of hand presses, a shirt-folding unit, and then stopped by a laundry-marking machine. He passed a shaky hand across his forehead. ‘You’ll have to go over by yourself, Officer. I can’t look at it again. It makes me . . . I can’t. I’m sorry.’

Hunton walked around the marking machine with a mild feeling of contempt for the man. They run a loose shop, cut corners, run live steam through home-welded pipes, they work with dangerous cleaning chemicals without the proper protection, and finally, someone gets hurt. Or gets dead. Then they can’t look. They can’t—

Hunton saw it.

The machine was still running. No one had shut it off. The machine he later came to know intimately: the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder. A long and clumsy name. The people who worked here in the steam and the wet had a better name for it. The mangler.

Hunton took a long, frozen look, and then he performed a first in his fourteen years as a law-enforcement officer: he turned around, put a convulsive hand to his mouth, and threw up.

‘You didn’t eat much,’ Jackson said.

The women were inside, doing dishes and talking babies while John Hunton and Mark Jackson sat in lawn chairs near the aromatic barbecue. Hunton smiled slightly at the understatement. He had eaten nothing.

‘There was a bad one today,’ he said. ‘The worst.’

‘Car crash?’

‘No. Industrial.’

‘Messy?’

Hunton did not reply immediately, but his face made an involuntary, writhing grimace. He got a beer out of the cooler between them, opened it, and emptied half of it. ‘I suppose you college profs don’t know anything about industrial laundries?’

Jackson chuckled. ‘This one does. I spent a summer working in one as an undergraduate.’

‘Then you know the machine they call the speed ironer?’

Jackson nodded. 'Sure. They run damp flatwork through them, mostly sheets and linen. A big, long machine.'

'That's it,' Hunton said. 'A woman named Adelle Frawley got caught in it at the Blue Ribbon Laundry crosstown. It sucked her right in.'

Jackson looked suddenly ill. 'But . . . that can't happen, Johnny. There's a safety bar. If one of the women feeding the machine accidentally gets a hand under it, the bar snaps up and stops the machine. At least that's how I remember it.'

Hunton nodded. 'It's a state law. But it happened.'

Hunton closed his eyes and in the darkness he could see the Hadley-Watson speed ironer again, as it had been that afternoon. It formed a long, rectangular box in shape, thirty feet by six. At the feeder end, a moving canvas belt moved under the safety bar, up at a slight angle, and then down. The belt carried the damp-dried, wrinkled sheets in continuous cycle over and under sixteen huge revolving cylinders that made up the main body of the machine. Over eight and under eight, pressed between them like thin ham between layers of superheated bread. Steam heat in the cylinders could be adjusted up to 300 degrees for maximum drying. The pressure on the sheets that rode the moving canvas belt was set as 800 pounds per square foot to get out every wrinkle.

And Mrs Frawley, somehow, had been caught and dragged in. The steel, asbestos-jacketed pressing cylinders had been as red as barn paint, and the rising steam from the machine had carried the sickening stench of hot blood. Bits of her white blouse and blue slacks, even ripped segments of her bra and panties, had been torn free and ejected from the machine's far end thirty feet down, the bigger sections of cloth folded with grotesque and bloodstained neatness by the automatic folder. But not even that was the worst.

'It tried to fold everything,' he said to Jackson, tasting bile in his throat. 'But a person isn't a sheet, Mark. What I saw . . . what was left of her . . .' Like Stanner, the hapless foreman, he could not finish. 'They took her out in a basket,' he said softly.

Jackson whistled. 'Who's going to get it in the neck? The laundry or the state inspectors?'

'Don't know yet,' Hunton said. The malign image still hung behind the eyes, the image of the mangle wheezing and thumping and hissing, blood dripping down the green sides of the long

cabinet in runnels, the burning *stink* of her . . . 'It depends on who okayed that goddamn safety bar and under what circumstances.'

'If it's the management, can they wiggle out of it?'

Hunton smiled without humour. 'The woman died, Mark. If Gartley and Stanner were cutting corners on the speed ironer's maintenance, they'll go to jail. No matter who they know on the City Council.'

'Do you think they were cutting corners?'

Hunton thought of the Blue Ribbon Laundry, badly lighted, floors wet and slippery, some of the machines incredibly ancient and creaking. 'I think it's likely,' he said quietly.

They got up to go in the house together. 'Tell me how it comes out, Johnny,' Jackson said. 'I'm interested.'

Hunton was wrong about the mangler; it was clean as a whistle.

Six state inspectors went over it before the inquest, piece by piece. The net result was absolutely nothing. The inquest verdict was death by misadventure.

Hunton, dumbfounded, cornered Roger Martin, one of the inspectors, after the hearing. Martin was a tall drink of water with glasses as thick as the bottoms of shot glasses. He fidgeted with a ball point pen under Hunton's questions.

'Nothing? Absolutely nothing doing with the machine?'

'Nothing,' Martin said. 'Of course, the safety bar was the guts of the matter. It's in perfect working order. You heard that Mrs Gillian testify. Mrs Frawley must have pushed her hand too far. No one saw that; they were watching their own work. She started screaming. Her hand was gone already, and the machine was taking her arm. They tried to pull her out instead of shutting it down - pure panic. Another woman, Mrs Keene, said she *did* try to shut it off, but it's a fair assumption that she hit the start button rather than the stop in the confusion. By then it was too late.'

'Then the safety bar malfunctioned,' Hunton said flatly. 'Unless she put her hand over it rather than under?'

'You can't. There's a stainless-steel facing above the safety bar. And the bar itself didn't malfunction. It's circuited into the machine itself. If the safety bar goes on the blink, the machine shuts down.'

'Then how did it happen, for Christ's sake?'

'We don't know. My colleagues and I are of the opinion that the only way the speed ironer could have killed Mrs Frawley was for her to have fallen into it from above. And she had both feet on the floor when it happened. A dozen witnesses can testify to that.'

'You're describing an impossible accident,' Hunton said.

'No. Only one we don't understand.' He paused, hesitated, and then said: 'I will tell you one thing, Hunton, since you seem to have taken this case to heart. If you mention it to anyone else, I'll deny I said it. But I didn't like that machine. It seemed . . . almost to be mocking us. I've inspected over a dozen speed ironers in the last five years on a regular basis. Some of them are in such bad shape that I wouldn't leave a dog unleashed around them – the state law is lamentably lax. But they were only machines for all that. But this one . . . it's a spook. I don't know why, but it is. I think if I'd found one thing, even a technicality, that was off whack, I would have ordered it shut down. Crazy, huh?'

'I felt the same way,' Hunton said.

'Let me tell you about something that happened two years ago in Milton,' the inspector said. He took off his glasses and began to polish them slowly on his vest. 'Fella had parked an old icebox out in his backyard. The woman who called us said her dog had been caught in it and suffocated. We got the state policeman in the area to inform him it had to go to the town dump. Nice enough fella, sorry about the dog. He loaded it into his pickup and took it to the dump the next morning. That afternoon a woman in the neighbourhood reported her son missing.'

'God,' Hunton said.

'The icebox was at the dump and the kid was in it, dead. A smart kid, according to his mother. She said he'd no more play in an empty icebox than he would take a ride with a strange man. Well, he did. We wrote it off. Case closed?'

'I guess,' Hunton said.

'No. The dump caretaker went out next day to take the door off the thing. City Ordinance No. 58 on the maintenance of public dumping places.' Martin looked at him expressionlessly. 'He found six dead birds inside. Gulls, sparrows, a robin. And he said the door closed on his arm while he was brushing them out. Gave him a hell of a jump. That mangler at the Blue Ribbon strikes me like that, Hunton. I don't like it.'

They looked at each other wordlessly in the empty inquest chamber, some six city blocks from where the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder sat in the busy laundry, steaming and fuming over its sheets.

The case was driven out of his mind in the space of a week by the press of more prosaic police work. It was only brought back when he and his wife dropped over to Mark Jackson's house for an evening of bid whist and beer.

Jackson greeted him with: 'Have you ever wondered if that laundry machine you told me about is haunted, Johnny?'

Hunton blinked, at a loss. 'What?'

'The speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, I guess you didn't catch the squeal this time.'

'What squeal?' Hunton asked, interested.

Jackson passed him the evening paper and pointed to an item at the bottom of page two. The story said that a steam line had let go on the large speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, burning three of the six women working at the feeder end. The accident had occurred at 3.45 p.m., and was attributed to a rise in steam pressure from the laundry's boiler. One of the women, Mrs Annette Gillian, had been held at City Receiving Hospital with second-degree burns.

'Funny coincidence,' he said, but the memory of Inspector Martin's words in the empty inquest chamber suddenly recurred: *It's a spook . . .* And the story about the dog and the boy and the birds caught in the discarded refrigerator.

He played cards very badly that night.

Mrs Gillian was propped up in bed reading *Screen Secrets* when Hunton came into the four-bed hospital room. A large bandage blanketed one arm and the side of her neck. The room's other occupant, a young woman with a pallid face, was sleeping.

Mrs Gillian blinked at the blue uniform and then smiled tentatively. 'If it was for Mrs Cherinikov, you'll have to come back later. They just gave her medication.'

'No, it's for you, Mrs Gillian.' Her smile faded a little. 'I'm here unofficially – which means I'm curious about the accident at the laundry. John Hunton.' He held out his hand.

It was the right move. Mrs Gillian's smile became brilliant and she took his grip awkwardly with her unburnt hand. 'Anything I can tell you, Mr Hunton. God, I thought my Andy was in trouble at school again.'

'What happened?'

'We was running sheets and the ironer just blew up – or it seemed that way. I was thinking about going home an' getting off my dogs when there's this great big bang, like a bomb. Steam is everywhere and this hissing noise . . . awful.' Her smile trembled on the verge of extinction. 'It was like the ironer was breathing. Like a dragon, it was. And Alberta – that's Alberta Keene – shouted that something was exploding and everyone was running and screaming and Ginny Jason started yelling she was burnt. I started to run away and I fell down. I didn't know I got it worst until then. God forbid it was no worse than it was. That live steam is three hundred degrees.'

'The paper said a steam line let go. What does that mean?'

'The overhead pipe comes down into this kinda flexible line that feeds the machine. George – Mr Stanner – said there must have been a surge from the boiler or something. The line split wide open.'

Hunton could think of nothing else to ask. He was making ready to leave when she said reflectively:

'We never used to have these things on that machine. Only lately. The steam line breaking. That awful, awful accident with Mrs Frawley, God rest her. And little things. Like the day Essie got her dress caught in one of the drive chains. That could have been dangerous if she hadn't ripped it right out. Bolts and things fall off. Oh, Herb Diment – he's the laundry repairman – has had an awful time with it. Sheets get caught in the folder. George says that's because they're using too much bleach in the washers, but it never used to happen. Now the girls hate to work on it. Essie even says there are still little bits of Adelle Frawley caught in it and it's sacrilege or something. Like it had a curse. It's been that way ever since Sherry cut her hand on one of the clamps.'

'Sherry?' Hunton asked.

'Sherry Ouelette. Pretty little thing, just out of high school. Good worker. But clumsy sometimes. You know how young girls are.'

'She cut her hand on something?'

'Nothing strange about *that*. There are clamps to tighten down the feeder belt, see. Sherry was adjusting them so we could do a heavier load and probably dreaming about some boy. She cut her finger and bled all over everything.' Mrs Gillian looked puzzled. 'It wasn't until after that the bolts started falling off. Adelle was . . . you know . . . about a week later. As if the machine had tasted blood and found it liked it. Don't women get funny ideas sometimes, Officer Hinton?'

'Hunton,' he said absently, looking over her head and into space.

Ironically, he had met Mark Jackson in a washeteria in the block that separated their houses, and it was there that the cop and the English professor still had their most interesting conversations.

Now they sat side by side in bland plastic chairs, their clothes going round and round behind the glass portholes of the coin-op washers. Jackson's paperback copy of Milton's collected works lay neglected beside him while he listened to Hunton tell Mrs Gillian's story.

When Hunton had finished, Jackson said, 'I asked you once if you thought the mangler might be haunted. I was only half joking. I'll ask you again now.'

'No,' Hunton said uneasily. 'Don't be stupid.'

Jackson watched the turning clothes reflectively. 'Haunted is a bad word. Let's say possessed. There are almost as many spells for casting demons in as there are for casting them out. Frazer's *Golden Bough* is replete with them. Druidic and Aztec lore contain others. Even older ones, back to Egypt. Almost all of them can be reduced to startlingly common denominators. The most common, of course, is the blood of a virgin.' He looked at Hunton. 'Mrs Gillian said the trouble started after this Sherry Ouelette accidentally cut herself.'

'Oh, come on,' Hunton said.

'You have to admit she sounds just the type,' Jackson said.

'I'll run right over to her house,' Hunton said with a small smile. 'I can see it. "Miss Ouelette, I'm Officer John Hunton. I'm investigating an ironer with a bad case of demon possession and would like to know if you're a virgin." Do you think I'd get a chance to say goodbye to Sandra and the kids before they carted me off to the booby hatch?'

'I'd be willing to bet you'll end up saying something just like that,' Jackson said without smiling. 'I'm serious, Johnny. That machine scares the hell out of me and I've never seen it.'

'For the sake of conversation,' Hunton said, 'what are some of the other so-called common denominators?'

Jackson shrugged. 'Hard to say without study. Most Anglo-Saxon hex formulas specify graveyard dirt or the eye of a toad. European spells often mention the hand of glory, which can be interpreted as the actual hand of a dead man or one of the hallucinogenics used in connection with the Witches' Sabbath – usually belladonna or a psilocybin derivative. There could be others.'

'And you think all those things got into the Blue Ribbon ironer? Christ, Mark, I'll bet there isn't any belladonna within a five-hundred-mile radius. Or do you think someone whacked off their Uncle Fred's hand and dropped it in the folder?'

'If seven hundred monkeys typed for seven hundred years—'

'One of them would turn out the works of Shakespeare,' Hunton finished sourly. 'Go to hell. Your turn to go across to the drugstore and get some dimes for the dryers.'

It was very funny how George Stanner lost his arm in the mangler.

Seven o'clock Monday morning the laundry was deserted except for Stanner and Herb Diment, the maintenance man. They were performing the twice-yearly function of greasing the mangler's bearings before the laundry's regular day began at seven-thirty. Diment was at the far end, greasing the four secondaries and thinking of how unpleasant this machine made him feel lately, when the mangler suddenly roared into life.

He had been holding up four of the canvas exit belts to get at the motor beneath and suddenly the belts were running in his hands, ripping the flesh off his palms, dragging him along.

He pulled free with a convulsive jerk seconds before the belts would have carried his hands into the folder.

'What the Christ, George!' he yelled. 'Shut the frigging thing off!'

George Stanner began to scream.

It was a high, wailing, blood-maddened sound that filled the laundry, echoing off the steel faces of the washers, the grinning mouths of the steam presses, the vacant eyes of the industrial

dryers. Stanner drew in a great, whooping gasp of air and screamed again: '*Oh God of Christ I'm caught I'M CAUGHT—*'

The rollers began to produce rising steam. The folder gnashed and thumped. Bearings and motors seemed to cry out with a hidden life of their own.

Diment raced to the other end of the machine.

The first roller was already going a sinister red. Diment made a moaning, gobbling noise in his throat. The mangler howled and thumped and hissed.

A deaf observer might have thought at first that Stanner was merely bent over the machine at an odd angle. Then even a deaf man would have seen the pallid, eye-bulging rictus of his face, mouth twisted open in a continuous scream. The arm was disappearing under the safety bar and beneath the first roller; the fabric of his shirt had torn away at the shoulder seam and his upper arm bulged grotesquely as the blood was pushed steadily backward.

'Turn it off!' Stanner screamed. There was a snap as his elbow broke.

Diment thumbed the off button.

The mangler continued to hum and growl and turn.

Unbelieving, he slammed the button again and again – nothing. The skin of Stanner's arm had grown shiny and taut. Soon it would split with the pressure the roll was putting on it; and still he was conscious and screaming. Diment had a nightmare cartoon image of a man flattened by a steamroller, leaving only a shadow.

'Fuses—' Stanner screeched. His head was being pulled down, down, as he was dragged forward.

Diment whirled and ran to the boiler room, Stanner's screams chasing him like lunatic ghosts. The mixed stench of blood and steam rose in the air.

On the left wall were three heavy grey boxes containing all the fuses for the laundry's electricity. Diment yanked them open and began to pull the long, cylindrical fuses like a crazy man, throwing them back over his shoulders. The overhead lights went out; then the air compressor; then the boiler itself, with a huge dying whine.

And still the mangler turned. Stanner's screams had been reduced to bubbly moans.

Diment's eye happened on the fire axe in its glassed-in box. He grabbed it with a small, gagging whimper and ran back. Stanner's

arm was gone almost to the shoulder. Within seconds his bent and straining neck would be snapped against the safety bar.

'I can't,' Diment blubbered, holding the axe. 'Jesus, George, I can't, I can't, I—'

The machine was an abattoir now. The folder spat out pieces of shirt sleeve, scraps of flesh, a finger. Stanner gave a huge, whooping scream and Diment swung the axe up and brought it down in the laundry's shadowy lightlessness. Twice. Again.

Stanner fell away, unconscious and blue, blood jetting from the stump just below the shoulder. The mangler sucked what was left into itself . . . and shut down.

Weeping, Diment pulled his belt out of its loops and began to make a tourniquet.

Hunton was talking on the phone with Roger Martin, the inspector. Jackson watched him while he patiently rolled a ball back and forth for three-year-old Patty Hunton to chase.

'He pulled *all* the fuses?' Hunton was asking. 'And the off button just didn't function, huh? . . . Has the ironer been shut down? . . . Good. Great. Huh? . . . No, not official.' Hunton frowned, then looked sideways at Jackson. 'Are you still reminded of that refrigerator, Roger? . . . Yes. Me too. Goodbye.'

He hung up and looked at Jackson. 'Let's go see the girl, Mark.'

She had her own apartment (the hesitant yet proprietary way she showed them in after Hunton had flashed his buzzer made him suspect that she hadn't had it long), and she sat uncomfortably across from them in the carefully decorated, postage-stamp living room.

'I'm Officer Hunton and this is my associate, Mr Jackson. It's about the accident at the laundry.' He felt hugely uncomfortable with this dark, shyly pretty girl.

'Awful,' Sherry Oulette murmured. 'It's the only place I've ever worked. Mr Gartley is my uncle. I liked it because it let me have this place and my own friends. But now . . . it's so *spooky*.'

'The State Board of Safety has shut the ironer down pending a full investigation,' Hunton said. 'Did you know that?'

'Sure.' She sighed restlessly. 'I don't know what I'm going to do—'

'Miss Ouelette,' Jackson interrupted, 'you had an accident with the ironer, didn't you? Cut your hand on a clamp, I believe?'

'Yes, I cut my finger.' Suddenly her face clouded. 'That was the first thing.' She looked at them woefully. 'Sometimes I feel like the girls don't like me so much anymore . . . as if I were to blame.'

'I have to ask you a hard question,' Jackson said slowly. 'A question you won't like. It seems absurdly personal and off the subject, but I can only tell you it is not. Your answers won't ever be marked down in a file or record.'

She looked frightened. 'D-did I do something?'

Jackson smiled and shook his head; she melted. *Thank God for Mark*, Hunton thought.

'I'll add this, though: the answer may help you keep your nice little flat here, get your job back, and make things at the laundry the way they were before.'

'I'd answer anything to have that,' she said.

'Sherry, are you a virgin?'

She looked utterly flabbergasted, utterly shocked, as if a priest had given communion and then slapped her. Then she lifted her head, made a gesture at her neat efficient apartment, as if asking them how they could believe it might be a place of assignation.

'I'm saving myself for my husband,' she said simply.

Hunton and Jackson looked calmly at each other, and in that tick of a second, Hunton knew that it was all true: a devil had taken over the inanimate steel and cogs and gears of the mangler and had turned it into something with its own life.

'Thank you,' Jackson said quietly.

'What now?' Hunton asked bleakly as they rode back. 'Find a priest to exorcise it?'

Jackson snorted. 'You'd go a far piece to find one that wouldn't hand you a few tracts to read while he phoned the boobie hatch. It has to be our play, Johnny.'

'Can we do it?'

'Maybe. The problem is this: We know something is in the mangler. We don't know *what*.' Hunton felt cold, as if touched by a fleshless finger. 'There are a great many demons. Is the one we're dealing with in the circle of Bubastis or Pan? Baal? Or the Christian deity we call Satan? We don't know. If the demon had been

deliberately cast, we would have a better chance. But this seems to be a case of random possession.'

Jackson ran his fingers through his hair. 'The blood of a virgin, yes. But that narrows it down hardly at all. We have to be sure, very sure.'

'Why?' Hunton asked bluntly. 'Why not just get a bunch of exorcism formulas together and try them out?'

Jackson's face went cold. 'This isn't cops 'n' robbers, Johnny. For Christ's sake, don't think it is. The rite of exorcism is horribly dangerous. It's like controlled nuclear fission, in a way. We could make a mistake and destroy ourselves. The demon is caught in that piece of machinery. But give it a chance and—'

'It could get out?'

'It would love to get out,' Jackson said grimly. 'And it likes to kill.'

When Jackson came over the following evening, Hunton had sent his wife and daughter to a movie. They had the living room to themselves, and for this Hunton was relieved. He could still barely believe what he had become involved in.

'I cancelled my classes,' Jackson said, 'and spent the day with some of the most god-awful books you can imagine. This afternoon I fed over thirty recipes for calling demons into the tech computer. I've got a number of common elements. Surprisingly few.'

He showed Hunton the list: blood of a virgin, graveyard dirt, hand of glory, bat's blood, night moss, horse's hoof, eye of toad.

There were others, all marked secondary.

'Horse's hoof,' Hunton said thoughtfully, 'Funny—'

'Very common. In fact—'

'Could these things – any of them – be interpreted loosely?' Hunton interrupted.

'If lichens picked at night could be substituted for night moss, for instance?'

'Yes.'

'It's very likely,' Jackson said. 'Magical formulas are often ambiguous and elastic. The black arts have always allowed plenty of room for creativity.'

'Substitute Jell-O for horse's hoof,' Hunton said. 'Very popular in bag lunches. I noticed a little container of it sitting under the

ironer's sheet platform on the day the Frawley woman died. Gelatine is made from horses' hooves.'

Jackson nodded. 'Anything else?'

'Bat's blood . . . well, it's a big place. Lots of unlighted nooks and crannies. Bats seem likely, although I doubt if the management would admit to it. One could conceivably have been trapped in the mangler.'

Jackson tipped his head back and knuckled bloodshot eyes. 'It fits . . . it all fits.'

'It does?'

'Yes. We can safely rule out the hand of glory, I think. Certainly no one dropped a hand into the ironer *before* Mrs Frawley's death, and belladonna is definitely not indigenous to the area.'

'Graveyard dirt?'

'What do you think?'

'It would have to be a hell of a coincidence,' Hunton said. 'Nearest cemetery is Pleasant Hill, and that's five miles from the Blue Ribbon.'

'Okay,' Jackson said. 'I got the computer operator - who thought I was getting ready for Halloween - to run a positive breakdown of all the primary and secondary elements on the list. Every possible combination. I threw out some two dozen which were completely meaningless. The others fall into fairly clear-cut categories. The elements we've isolated are in one of those.'

'What is it?'

Jackson grinned. 'An easy one. The mythos centres in South America with branches in the Caribbean. Related to voodoo. The literature I've got looks on the deities as strictly bush league, compared to some of the real heavies, like Saddath or He-Who-Cannot-Be-Named. The thing in that machine is going to slink away like the neighbourhood bully.'

'How do we do it?'

'Holy water and a smidgen of the Holy Eucharist ought to do it. And we can read some of the Leviticus to it. Strictly Christian white magic.'

'You're sure it's not worse?'

'Don't see how it can be,' Jackson said pensively. 'I don't mind telling you I was worried about that hand of glory. That's very black juju. Strong magic.'

'Holy water wouldn't stop it?'

'A demon called up in conjunction with the hand of glory could eat a stack of Bibles for breakfast. We would be in bad trouble messing with something like that at all. Better to pull the goddamn thing apart.'

'Well, are you completely sure—'

'No, but fairly sure. It all fits too well.'

'When?'

'The sooner, the better,' Jackson said. 'How do we get in? Break a window?'

Hunton smiled, reached into his pocket, and dangled a key in front of Jackson's nose.

'Where'd you get that? Gartley?'

'No,' Hunton said. 'From a state inspector named Martin.'

'He know what we're doing?'

'I think he suspects. He told me a funny story a couple of weeks ago.'

'About the mangler?'

'No,' Hunton said. 'About a refrigerator. Come on.'

Adelle Frawley was dead; sewed together by a patient undertaker, she lay in her coffin. Yet something of her spirit perhaps remained in the machine, and if it did, it cried out. She would have known, could have warned them. She had been prone to indigestion, and for this common ailment she had taken a common stomach tablet called E-Z Gel, purchasable over the counter of any drugstore for seventy-nine cents. The side panel holds a printed warning: People with glaucoma must not take E-Z Gel, because the active ingredient causes an aggravation of that condition. Unfortunately, Adelle Frawley did not have that condition. She might have remembered the day, shortly before Sherry Ouelette cut her hand, that she had dropped a full box of E-Z Gel tablets into the mangler by accident. But she was dead, unaware that the active ingredient which soothed her heartburn was a chemical derivative of belladonna, known quaintly in some European countries as the hand of glory.

There was a sudden ghastly burping noise in the spectral silence of the Blue Ribbon Laundry – a bat fluttered madly for its hole in the insulation above the dryers where it had roosted, wrapping wings around its blind face.

It was a noise almost like a chuckle.

The mangler began to run with a sudden, lurching grind – belts hurrying through the darkness, cogs meeting and meshing and grinding, heavy pulverizing rollers rotating on and on.

It was ready for them.

When Hunton pulled into the parking lot it was shortly after midnight and the moon was hidden behind a raft of moving clouds. He jammed on the brakes and switched off the lights in the same motion; Jackson's forehead almost slammed against the padded dash.

He switched off the ignition and the steady thump-hiss-thump became louder. 'It's the mangler,' he said slowly. 'It's the mangler. Running by itself. In the middle of the night.'

They sat for a moment in silence, feeling the fear crawl up their legs.

Hunton said, 'All right. Let's do it.'

They got out and walked to the building, the sound of the mangler growing louder. As Hunton put the key into the lock of the service door, he thought that the machine *did* sound alive – as if it were breathing in great hot gasps and speaking to itself in hissing, sardonic whispers.

'All of a sudden I'm glad I'm with a cop,' Jackson said. He shifted the brown bag he held from one arm to the other. Inside was a small jelly jar filled with holy water wrapped in waxed paper, and a Gideon Bible.

They stepped inside and Hunton snapped up the light switches by the door. The fluorescents flickered into cold life. At the same instant the mangler shut off.

A membrane of steam hung over its rollers. It waited for them in its new ominous silence.

'God, it's an ugly thing,' Jackson whispered.

'Come on,' Hunton said. 'Before we lose our nerve.'

They walked over to it. The safety bar was in its down position over the belt which fed the machine.

Hunton put out a hand. 'Close enough, Mark. Give me the stuff and tell me what to do.'

'But—'

'No argument.'

Jackson handed him the bag and Hunton put it on the sheet table in front of the machine. He gave Jackson the Bible.

'I'm going to read,' Jackson said. 'When I point at you, sprinkle the holy water on the machine with your fingers. You say: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, get thee from this place, thou unclean. Got it?'

'Yes.'

'The second time I point, break the wafer and repeat the incantation again.'

'How will we know if it's working?'

'You'll know. The thing is apt to break every window in the place getting out. If it doesn't work the first time, we keep doing it until it does.'

'I'm scared green,' Hunton said.

'As a matter of fact, so am I.'

'If we're wrong about the hand of glory—'

'We're not,' Jackson said. 'Here we go.'

He began. His voice filled the empty laundry with spectral echoes. 'Turnest not thou aside to idols, nor make molten gods for yourself. I am the Lord thy God...' The words fell like stones into a silence that had suddenly become filled with a creeping, tomblike cold. The mangler remained still and silent under the fluorescents, and to Hunton it still seemed to grin.

'... and the land will vomit you out for having defiled it, as it vomited out nations before you.' Jackson looked up, his face strained, and pointed.

Hunton sprinkled holy water across the feeder belt.

There was a sudden, gnashing scream of tortured metal. Smoke rose from the canvas belts where the holy water had touched and took on writhing, red-tinged shapes. The mangler suddenly jerked into life.

'We've got it!' Jackson cried above the rising clamour. 'It's on the run!'

He began to read again, his voice rising over the sound of the machinery. He pointed to Hunton again, and Hunton sprinkled some of the host. As he did so he was suddenly swept with a bone-freezing terror, a sudden vivid feeling that it had gone wrong, that the machine had called their bluff — and was the stronger.

Jackson's voice was still rising, approaching climax.

Sparks began to jump across the arc between the main motor and the secondary; the smell of ozone filled the air, like the copper smell of hot blood. Now the main motor was smoking; the mangler was running at an insane, blurred speed: a finger touched to the central belt would have caused the whole body to be hauled in and turned to a bloody rag in the space of five seconds. The concrete beneath their feet trembled and thrummed.

A main bearing blew with a searing flash of purple light, filling the chill air with the smell of thunderstorms, and still the mangler ran, faster and faster, belts and rollers and cogs moving at a speed that made them seem to blend and merge, change, melt, transmute—

Hunton, who had been standing almost hypnotized, suddenly took a step backward. 'Get away!' he screamed over the blaring racket.

'We've almost got it!' Jackson yelled back. 'Why—'

There was a sudden indescribable ripping noise and a fissure in the concrete floor suddenly raced towards them and past, widening. Chips of ancient cement flew up in a starburst.

Jackson looked at the mangler and screamed.

It was trying to pull itself out of the concrete, like a dinosaur trying to escape a tar pit. And it wasn't precisely an ironer anymore. It was still changing, melting. The 550-volt cable fell, spitting blue fire, into the rollers and was chewed away. For a moment two fireballs glared at them like lambent eyes, eyes filled with a great and cold hunger.

Another fault line tore open. The mangler leaned towards them, within an ace of being free of the concrete moorings that held it. It leered at them; the safety bar had slammed up and what Hunton saw was a gaping, hungry mouth filled with steam.

They turned to run and another fissure opened at their feet. Behind them, a great screaming roar as the thing came free. Hunton leaped over, but Jackson stumbled and fell sprawling.

Hunton turned to help and a huge, amorphous shadow fell over him, blocking the fluorescents.

It stood over Jackson, who lay on his back, staring up in a silent rictus of terror — the perfect sacrifice. Hunton had only a confused impression of something black and moving that bulked to a tremendous height above them both, something with glaring electric

eyes the size of footballs, an open mouth with a moving canvas tongue.

He ran; Jackson's dying scream followed him.

When Roger Martin finally got out of bed to answer the doorbell, he was still only a third awake; but when Hunton reeled in, shock slapped him fully into the world with a rough hand.

Hunton's eyes bulged madly from his head, and his hands were claws as he scratched at the front of Martin's robe. There was a small oozing cut on his cheek and his face was splashed with dirty grey specks of powdered cement.

His hair had gone dead white.

'Help me . . . for Jesus' sake, help me. Mark is dead. Jackson is dead.'

'Slow down,' Martin said. 'Come in the living room.'

Hunton followed him, making a thick whining noise in his throat, like a dog.

Martin poured him a two-ounce knock of Jim Beam and Hunton held the glass in both hands, downing the raw liquor in a choked gulp. The glass fell unheeded to the carpet and his hands, like wandering ghosts, sought Martin's lapels again.

'The mangler killed Mark Jackson. It . . . it . . . oh God, it might get out! We can't let it get out! We can't . . . we . . . oh—' He began to scream, a crazy, whooping sound that rose and fell in jagged cycles.

Martin tried to hand him another drink but Hunton knocked it aside. 'We have to burn it,' he said. 'Burn it before it can get out. Oh, what if it gets out? Oh Jesus, what if—' His eyes suddenly flickered, glazed, rolled up to show the whites, and he fell to the carpet in a stonelike faint.

Mrs Martin was in the doorway, clutching her robe to her throat. 'Who is he, Rog? Is he crazy? I thought—' She shuddered.

'I don't think he's crazy.' She was suddenly frightened by the sick shadow of fear on her husband's face. 'God, I hope he came quick enough.'

He turned to the telephone, picked up the receiver, froze.

There was a faint, swelling noise from the east of the house, the way that Hunton had come. A steady, grinding clatter, growing louder. The living-room window stood half open and now Martin

caught a dark smell on the breeze. An odour of ozone . . . or blood.

He stood with his hand on the useless telephone as it grew louder, louder, gnashing and fuming, something in the streets that was hot and steaming. The blood stench filled the room.

His hand dropped from the telephone.

It was already out.

James McClure

God, it was fun

There is a dead girl in Chicago you can walk in and out of. Hers was the very first corpse Tommy Tomacelli ever laid eyes on, and it gave him a lifelong fascination for the extraordinary things that can happen to people, no matter how hard your father holds your hand when you are young.

He was exactly eight and on his birthday treat when Papa Tomacelli, an earnest, largely self-educated locksmith, introduced her to him on the main staircase of the Museum of Science and Industry over on the south side. To begin with, it wasn't clear what his father was showing him, as they made their way slowly up the white marble steps, never more than one at a time. There was this series of brass-edged panels jutting out of the wall at right angles; each panel being made up of two tall sheets of glass with something sandwiched between them, so that you could inspect it from either side. The first panel contained what seemed like a squashed brown ear and, a little way below it, sort of separate, a peanut-shaped pattern of dull pinks and yellows and greys surrounded by a thin brown line. The reverse side was much the same, except there wasn't an ear, just a round patch with a hole in it. But gradually, as each successive panel displayed a larger peanut shape connected more and more obviously to the round patch on top, which had grown a fringe of black hairs, they started to suggest a picture of someone, just like those babyish paintings in the Art Institute downtown. And finally, when he and his father reached the central panel, the head and torso of a nigger girl was revealed in stark profile, cross-sectioned right through the middle.

'Is she *real*, Papa?'

'Sure, it's real! Look for yourself.'

'What's that?'

'The stomach.'

'And that?'

'The uterus.'

'What's that for?'

'You like to see inside, huh?'

'How come she's a nigger, Papa?'

'Make no difference; everybody the same under the skin.'

'Then how come she has to be a nigger?'

'Does it matter?' Papa Tomacelli said, before adding with one of his slight smiles: 'Maybe it was to give a nice outline – y'know, the same as you do on your drawings with a black crayon.'

That made good sense, so he asked: 'How did she get cut into thin slices, Papa? Who did that?'

'The doctors.'

'How?'

'Search me,' replied Papa, proud his son should be showing such an intelligent interest in a scientific exhibit. 'You wanna hear the rest of the parts read out, maybe?'

'Was it with a thing like Mr Parelo's salami slicer?'

His father chuckled and said, bending low to whisper: 'Tell you what, my genius, some day – when you're a rich and famous doctor, living in a swell apartment on the north side – me and Mama will pay a call, and you can explain to us all about people's bodies. Okay?'

Then, hand in hand, they went on to examine the rest of the girl, stepping in and out between the panels until they reached the other ear. It was also squashed flat; pressed hard against the glass as though, without much of a smile, she were listening to Papa Tomacelli's predictions for the future.

'Holy Mother of God,' said Sergeant O'Hare, meeting them in the ritzy hallway, his face the colour of a shamrock, 'nobody's gonna believe this one! This is a stiff like you've never seen before . . .'

Big Tommy Tomacelli wasn't impressed. His old man might have been way out on some of his forecasts, but, taking things all in all, he'd come pretty close. Tomacelli now lived the best part of his life on the north side, working out of the 18th on beat 1815, which took in the Gold Coast, that dazzle of the swellest apartments in town along Lake Shore Drive. Sure, he wasn't rich, nor was he famous – a shoot-out with a sex nut in Lincoln Park had brought too brief a glory in a summer notable for mayhem – yet

he did know one hell of a lot about bodies. In twenty years a patrolman in the Chicago Police Department, he reckoned he'd seen every kind and condition of stiff there was to see, from floaters to ledgejumpers, from closet mummies to a guy split to the pelvis by a sheet of ice dropping from a window eighty floors above North Michigan Avenue. It was going to take a lot to surprise him.

This didn't mean, though, he wasn't interested.

'Pretty hairy, huh?' he said, speaking from the back.

O'Hare lit up with a shaky hand, took a deep draw on his cigarette and shuddered. 'Jesus,' he muttered, 'like I say, you ain't gonna believe it.'

'Why? How does it look?' asked the man from the meat wagon.

'It looks—' O'Hare laughed short and sharp. 'Ever heard of Humpty Dumpty?'

The meat wagon man grinned. 'You mean we should've brought along a big spoon?'

'But what the hell is there to fall off inside an apartment?' said his buddy, gauging the height of the ceiling in the hallway. 'I don't get this.'

'Thought it was homicide,' murmured Tomacelli.

'You'll see,' O'Hare told them. 'You'll see for yourself just as soon as the lieutenant gets through with the wife.'

Then he laughed again, giggled almost, like there was some terrific visual gag waiting for them in that apartment and he didn't want to blow the punchline.

'Who's dead?' asked a photographer.

'Dr Frank K. Agostino.'

'The plastic surgeon?'

O'Hare raised an eyebrow. 'You've heard of him?'

'Sure – who hasn't? Moved here from LA and did that job on Ed Skrzypek when he got hit with the battery acid.'

'I remember,' chipped in the man from the meat wagon, who always talked a lot, fast and nervous. 'He did it for free – right? Outa respect for the department. The *Tribune* wrote it up and I read it. How come it's always the good guys?'

Although that was far from true, the mood in the hallway of that Gold Coast condominium changed slightly, becoming more

thoughtful and less like a line outside a freak show. The lieutenant's voice rumbled just the other side of the door to 45b, indicating he'd be out soon.

Tomacelli unwrapped a fresh stick of dental gum. He had started to feel strangely jittery about the stiff he would see any minute now.

'You like that stuff?' inquired the meat wagon man, turning at the sound of the paper and seeing the brand name.

'Nope,' said Tomacelli.

He knew what the matter was: despite twenty years' experience, despite stiffs by the score and by the hundred, he'd never forgotten that black girl still displayed, so his kids told him, on the main staircase of the Museum of Science and Industry. There were two main reasons for this, the most obvious being the little reminders of her that kept cropping up here and there. Every time his wife used that wire-strung gadget for slicing hardboiled eggs to pretty up a salad, or when he made the toast, separating the slices and spacing them out in the toast rack, back would come the unsolved mystery of how the cross sectioning had been done. Sometimes he would begin to figure it out, taking as his starting point the body of a junkie he'd found one mean winter's night behind a bar on Rush Street: frozen solid, that kid had been, hard as any piece of timber a man ever took a saw to. But he never got much further than that on account of his real interest in the girl being – well, more personal, you could say.

'I'm Max Wynberg,' said the meat wagon man. 'Only been on the job five weeks. I guess you've been in one of these places before? Sure stinks of money. Always some kinda stink, have you noticed?'

'Uhuh,' said Tomacelli.

It wasn't easy to explain why the girl had stayed on his mind, not without admitting to the *thrill* she'd given him – and that was a word some folk would be only too happy to make the most of. But all he meant by it was a thin wriggle of fear, a tingling sense of awe, of pure, sexless excitement that no other cadaver had ever given him; almost a religious feeling, goddamn it, that whipped your breath away, leaving you with the idea you'd just learned a great truth. About what? About man? About yourself? The odds were he'd never know.

'Lieut's on his way out,' said the meat wagon man.

'Here's hoping,' said Tomacelli.

There was a crush inside the master bedroom of 45b, making it impossible to look directly at the bed and see what was on it. From his position in the rear, Big Tommy Tomacelli raised his gaze over the heads of the men in front of him and sought out a mirror. There was a large one on the opposite wall above the vanity and, reflected dead centre, was Humpty Dumpty.

He was seated on the edge of the bed, facing himself in the mirror, in a pair of bright red pyjamas. He had no neck, no shoulders, no chest or abdomen; just a monstrous egg-shaped head, half a man high, from which a pair of hands hung limply. He wore a high-crowned green hat, blanced above a neat central parting in his sparse black hair, and his ears stuck out at right angles. His eyes were pink and set far apart, his nose was an obscene projection, and his whistling mouth was Dr Frank K. Agostino's navel.

The crush broke up then. Some men left the room, pushing past with faces blank with stunned realization, while others, protected from the full impact by having immediate tasks to perform, set grimly about their preparations.

Fascinated, Tomacelli moved forward, circling the foot of the bed to confront the dead man, whose egg-shaped, flabby torso was keeping him upright.

Agostino's head was, in fact, inside the tall green hat, which also hid his neck, and for this reason had gone unnoticed. His lidless eyes gleamed dully through two holes that had been scissored in the hat to give him an inescapable view of his carnival reflection.

Just below the brim of the hat, a parting had been combed in his small patch of chest hairs, and then his eyelids had been sewn with tiny stitches above his nipples. The severed ears and hands had also been sewn into position. Where the nose had come from was all too obvious, judging by the blood-soaked crotch of the pyjamas.

'Jeez,' said the photographer, lining up for a shot of the arm stumps tied behind the back, 'isn't this the goddamndest thing you ever saw?'

Tomacelli shrugged. 'Seen worse,' he said.

'Oh, yeah? Wanna bet on that?'

'Same goes for you.'

'Like when?'

'Like last Tuesday.'

The photographer lowered his camera to frown. Last Tuesday they had both been in the morgue when the body of a skinny kid had been brought in, her bones bust like sesame sticks by her ever lovin' momma and poppa.

'How do you figure that out?' he said, putting his eye to the viewfinder again.

Wishing he could express himself better, Tomacelli grunted. He nodded to Doc Bell, whose wrinkled throat and thin, hard lips had always reminded him of a desert lizard.

'Hi, Doc,' he said. 'What's new?'

'Hi, Big Tommy. How's the back?'

'A lot better.'

'Fine. Well, I guess this wraps it up for now.'

Doc Bell took a thermometer out from under the stiff.

'Been dead long?' Tomacelli asked.

'Coupla hours.'

'Who found him?'

'Mrs Agostino. She went down to the pool in the building with her neighbours around eight. They came back up at ten thirty, stopped by for a coffee and she went to see if he was awake - he'd gone to bed with a head cold.'

'Some cure,' said Tomacelli.

He looked at the bedclothes and saw they had been folded back very neatly.

Doc Bell anticipated his next question: 'No violence used,' he said. 'He was shot full of dope: muscle relaxant, localized anaesthetic, stuff to screw up his motor system. He bled to death through a loosely tied suture. Looks deliberate.'

'He was paralytic?'

'A basket case, but I reckon he didn't feel a thing.'

Tomacelli smiled one of his slight smiles. 'But whoever did it sure knew how to hurt a man.'

He looked round to see what the others were doing. A technician was kneeling beside the bed table, carefully transferring the litter of small bottles, ampoules, gut needles, syringes, scalpels and

clamps into labelled plastic bags. Two others were working with fingerprint powder.

'See you, Doc,' he said.

'See you, Big Tommy.'

Tomacelli wandered out of the bedroom totally unmoved by what he had seen there. He found this very disappointing.

The black doorman was being interrogated in the kitchen. Two seconds of that and you'd heard his story twice over: no, suh, saw nuttin', suh; only dem folks I knows.

Things weren't much more interesting out on the balcony, where efforts were being made to see if the psycho had come down off the roof. That's what everyone was calling him out there, 'the psycho' – as if that meant anything in a crazy world.

So Tomacelli decided, as he'd not been assigned any particular duty so far, to find the john and see if the toilet roll had a musical box in its roller; this was the one indulgence of the rich which never failed to amuse him. But he did not get further than the third door down the hall.

'Over here,' said Lieutenant Grant, beckoning with the newspaper he always carried.

Tomacelli saw he was standing alongside two cents' worth of misery in a thousand dollar suit.

'You busy, Big Tommy?'

'No, sir.'

'This here's Dr Hickey, who's been taking care of Mrs Agostino. You've seen the body?'

'Yes, sir.'

Both men looked up at Tomacelli's face as though they expected him to add something; he was damned if he knew what, so he just kept his expression nice and polite and casual.

'Then you can guess the effect it's had on her,' said Grant, a hint of doubt in his voice.

'Sure. Probably bombed outa her tree.'

'Mrs Agostino,' said Dr Hickey, glancing back over his shoulder into a dimly-lit room, 'is in a state of deep shock. She refuses to have any sedation; she won't lie down; she won't go into hospital; she won't allow us to call anybody to be with her.' He moved restlessly.

'You want me to stick around, lieutenant?'

'Until we can get something organized – might not be before morning.'

'I'm easy.'

'Good,' said Grant, 'one thing's settled.' He looked a very worried man.

'I'll just familiarize the patient with the situation,' Dr Hickey told them.

Tomacelli watched him walk pigeon-toed down the length of the room and pause beside a high-backed chair that faced away towards the big desk across one corner.

'When we got here, she was laughing hysterically,' Grant murmured, 'and I mean literally. Not often you really hear that.'

'Nope. How were the neighbours?'

'Wiped out – they've gone to their daughter's.'

'What's the lady like?'

Grant grinned. 'You'll see,' he murmured. 'Don't worry if she doesn't talk much.'

'You got nothing from her?'

'Didn't try. She's in no condition.'

Dr Hickey lifted something from the desktop and came out carrying a black bag with gold trim. He tossed Tomacelli a bottle of capsules.

'Give her three if she asks for them,' he ordered. 'Call me at home if there are any *real* problems, but otherwise . . .'

'I dig,' said Tomacelli. 'Any theories, lieutenant?'

'Doc Bell's worked up quite a few on the stuff that was used.'

'Great.'

Tomacelli went into the room and thoughtfully closed the door against the squeak of the meat wagon's trolley. It bugged him to overhear Grant whisper: 'As dumb as all hell but they don't come more dependable.' Then curiosity shoved aside all else as he advanced quietly over the thick, tangerine carpet, making for the high-backed chair. He went on a pace past it before turning round.

He felt a tingle. Sitting in the high-backed chair was the most beautiful girl he had ever laid eyes on.

Straight away, Tomacelli goofed. He did something that he'd not done since his first days as a rookie: he tried to sit down in the chair

behind the desk without first removing his nightstick from his belt. He came to his feet like he'd been goosed.

Mrs Agostino smiled at him.

He sat down again. 'I'm Police Officer Tomacelli,' he said. 'If there's anything you want, just ask for it.'

'No, nothing,' she replied dreamily, crossing her trim ankles.

They stared at one another.

Tomacelli tried to work out who she looked like, using as obvious terms of reference the movie stars he'd most admired. Grace Kelly came to mind, suggested by the perfectly chiselled nose, and then was overtaken by the lips of Gina Lollabrigida, before giving way to the breasts of Monroe. There was, in fact, no one star she resembled; she seemed simply to be made up of the best from all of them. He dropped his eyes to the portrait of her that stood in a silver frame on the desk top; she had signed it, with a flourish, *Love me, Lisa*.

'You certainly *look* like a police officer,' she said, still in a dreamy voice, but friendly.

'I do?'

'Tell me: are they born – or are they made?'

'Both, I reckon.'

'And which were you?'

'Not born. My old man had other plans.'

'What happened to them?' she asked, crossing her ankles again.

'Didn't do so good at school. Then he tried teaching me his craft, like he would have done in the old country. But my hands don't take to finicky work, although they're okay for other things.'

He told her the whole story. About how Papa Tomacelli had decided to exercise what little influence he had in the world, and had gone out to speak on his son's behalf to the men of the 4th district. They often had problems with safe deposit boxes, doors they wanted to see the other side of, that kind of thing, and respected Papa's quiet expertise in solving them. They'd been glad to help out in return.

When Tomacelli had finished, she said nothing. She looked away and studied the rows of bookshelves.

He was embarrassed. He turned his attention to the desktop, noting how methodical the dead man had been in the symmetrical arrangements of pens, paper-clip bowls and other items, some of

which had been disturbed by Dr Hickey's black bag. Then he noticed that a second silver-framed photograph had fallen on its back, and reached out to set it upright again.

But when he saw that it was a wedding portrait, he couldn't resist taking a quick look at the face which had been hidden by the green hat. He looked hard and long.

Agostino, positively identified by his hands (which had unusually tapered fingers), was beaming broadly, showing off a fine set of teeth in a handsome, slightly fleshy face. By contrast, however, the bride on his arm was a plain little freckle-faced thing, standing awkwardly and holding up her flowers to half-hide a flat chest unsuited to such a low neckline.

'Who's this?' he asked without thinking, turning the picture towards Mrs Agostino.

She took a moment to focus, before saying: 'Oh, that? Frank's first wife, Jean.'

'Jean?'

'Jean Krupowicz.'

Tomacelli was amazed. The man might have been a nut for symmetry, but balancing an old wife against a new seemed to be taking things a bit far. Then he realized how quick he had been to jump to a wild conclusion.

'Dr Agostino was a widower?' he asked, trying to be as discreet as he could, yet determined to know.

Mrs Agostino shook her head, smiling crookedly.

'You knew her?'

She nodded. 'A mousey little surgical nurse.'

'They worked together?'

'Oh, yes. They made quite a team when he first started out.'

'Um, and then you came along?'

'Then I came along,' echoed Mrs Agostino, her soft laugh very bitter. 'Although I wouldn't like you to think it was one of those things which happen overnight.'

She could say what she pleased; this kind of situation made Tomacelli mad. Another look at the photograph confirmed his view of Dr Frank K. Agostino as just another of the world's Grade A selfish bastards. Mousey Jean Krupowicz had been just right for him then, before he was sure of himself, back when he had needed her plain girl's devotion to boost his ego and help him

along. But once he'd made his name, once his own looks had started to fade a little, then he had found himself something a lot snappier to wear on his arm. The son of a bitch deserved all he'd got.

'Surgical nurse?' Tomacelli queried with a start.

Mrs Agostino raised her eyebrows.

'Did she know you'd moved to the Mid-West?'

Again he got no reply, but it was obvious that a Chicago bank would be named on the alimony cheques. In just the same way as it was obvious that a surgical nurse would have both the know-how and the access to drugs and stuff.

What had him beat was this Mrs Agostino's attitude. He asked: 'Isn't a bit unusual your husband would have both these pictures on his desk?'

'I think he liked to compare them.'

'Jesus,' said Tomacelli under his breath.

Then he became aware of how she was looking at him, long and steady and kind of empty. My God, he thought, she *knows*. She knows but she's not told anyone! Either the lady was crazy or there was much more to this.

'Mrs Agostino,' he said, not too sure how to play the next line, 'can we talk a little?'

'If you want.'

'Can I ask you a tough question?'

She lifted one shoulder to indicate her indifference.

'Were you – were you surprised by what happened tonight?'

'No,' she said.

That threw him for a moment. 'Jean Krupowicz?'

'Poor Jeanie,' she sighed.

'You feel sorry for her?'

'I do.'

'More than for your husband?'

'Lots, lots more. The things he did to her.'

Tomacelli wondered if he should go on with this, or call in the lieutenant. But now he had her talking it seemed foolish to stop in case she wouldn't go on again.

'Can you tell me about Jeanie?' he said.

'Nobody's interested in her any more.'

'I could be, lady. When were they married – fifteen, sixteen years

ago?' He was guessing by the style of clothes in the picture. 'Longer, maybe?'

'Seventeen,' she said, curling her legs up under her. 'Frank was fresh out of medical school when they first met though. It was a long courtship which Jeanie found very flattering. There were plenty of better-looking girls around, all trying to get their hooks into him, but they didn't interest him. He only had eyes for Jeanie. Sometimes he'd sit half an hour just looking at her, saying he wanted her to have everything. Jeanie found this had a weird effect on the other males in their circle; because she was so plain, and Frank so handsome, they came to the conclusion that she must have a sexual something they were missing out on, and they began to pester her, while the girls put out stories. There was something funny about the relationship, these people said, and that really upset her. She was pleased when Frank was well enough established for them to get married. But the stories still bothered her – she loved her man very much, and wanted him to have as much to love as he offered her. If you can follow that. Frank did, he was ready for it, he had the answers. They made a great little team. She helped him develop new techniques in surgery that soon had him way out ahead of the pack – nothing fancy, but practical help, the kind you can actually see the results of. And all the time she was getting prettier and prettier, so that the people they'd known at the start were astonished; it was like a miracle, they said. It made Frank very happy. Always said my little girl had potential, he told them, I saw it all there long ago. Soon Jeanie hardly knew herself when she looked in a mirror, but it didn't please her, she thought it was ugly what had happened to her, that she was turning into a monster. It's what love can do, Frank told her. I love you, baby, I want you to have everything. Because she still loved him then, Jeanie went along, not too sure what else she could do. It was great that, after all those years, Frank would still sit and stare at her for hours. Nobody else she knew had that kind of devotion. I suppose you've guessed by now that Jeanie wasn't all that hell bright. Then a newspaper got hold of the story of their special love and after that too many people were commenting, marvelling at what love could do. So they moved to another city and that was fine for a while. Then Jeanie noticed Frank wasn't staring at her much any longer; he was staring at another woman they saw at parties from time to

time and, as the months went by, this woman started getting prettier and prettier. Little things, but ones you noticed: a nose just like your own, idealized, a little dated; a bust that suddenly perked up and pressed outward, a perfect cleavage; a touch of sag under the eyes that vanished. Little things that meant a lot when Jeanie realized Frank no longer loved her. What had she got left? Not even herself, not even her name – that'd been lost years before, when it no longer fitted her. Poor Jeanie.'

Tears were sliding down Mrs Agostino's cheeks. She wasn't smiling any longer. She had hunched down in the chair so that the light from the desk now caught the side of her face, showing up the wrinkled pattern in her skin just below the ear.

Tomacelli looked at this ear and then at the one in the wedding portrait; ears never changed, he'd learned at the academy, they always remained distinctive. These ears were one and the same. He felt a sudden thrill, a sense of awe, of pure, sexless horror that took his breath away. In that moment he realized why, in all those years, he'd never had that feeling again, not since standing with Papa Tomacelli on the main staircase of the Museum of Science and Industry over on the south side. The reason was very simple: what violence man might do to a body in the name of evil was one thing, but what he did in the name of good, quite another.

He looked back up at Mrs Agostino, who had dried her tears, and realized a second truth: he'd never been much interested in stiffs, really, more in souls. You couldn't divide them.

'Hi, Jeanie,' he said.

'Hi,' she replied, then added with a beautiful smile: 'God, it was fun.'

Harry E. Turner

Flayed

Trapelli turned over on his rancid, rumpled bed and squinted at the New York dawn. It was streaking the grey horizon with watery sunlight and the raw October wind had dropped.

The window of Trapelli's room had the glass punched out of the frame and jagged shards still clung precariously to the rotting woodwork.

The room was littered with crushed beer cans and cigarette butts. A stringy rug was the only covering on the dank floor and at the skirting were the myriad teeth marks of hungry, gnawing rats. Less than an hour before dawn one of the stinking rodents had scurried over Trapelli's chest, leaving a trail of droppings on the already soiled blanket. Trapelli's skinny body shivered with cold as he knelt up and reached for his pack of cigarettes. A thin plume of smoke rose to the yellowed ceiling as he exhaled his first pull of the day.

In the next room, slightly larger than his ten foot square cell, he heard his father stirring from a massive, whisky-induced sleep. The man coughed loudly like a horse and reached noisily for the bottle.

Trapelli froze. He knew when his father found the bottle empty he would fly at once into a terrible rage – and although Trapelli was beyond fear now – his frail body trembled at the prospect of another beating.

He pushed his feet into soiled rubber sneakers and tip-toed to the door. If he could get out on to the street before the inevitable explosion, he'd be just about safe—for the time being. It was not to be, however. The connecting door between the two rooms burst open and his father lurched through. He was a big man with the red, clenched face of an alcoholic. Fists like hams hung loosely at his sides and he was breathing heavily. He saw Trapelli at the door and his expression changed from blankness to fury. Without a

word he moved across the tiny room and struck his son across the face. Trapelli collapsed like a felled tree and his father kicked him until he lay quite still. A thin rivulet of vomit trickled from Trapelli's mouth and he moaned softly.

His father steadied himself by placing the palm of his left hand against the wall and gazed sullenly at the boy. A surge of nausea overwhelmed him and he reeled out of the room towards the kitchen with its single cold water tap and lime encrusted basin.

The moment his father turned away, Trapelli was on his feet and through the door – his rubber soles moving silently over the stone corridor until he reached the stairs.

Minutes later he was on the street, his breath pluming like smoke against the chilled air. He kept moving at a loping trot until he reached the perimeter of Central Park, past Seventy-Fifth Street. The park, which crystallized within its eight hundred and forty acres all the contradictions and contrasts of the City itself, was Trapelli's playground.

By day it was a sunny, sprawling place with its honeysuckle and American elms, its sparrows, pigeons and ducks. All around, towering and encroaching, the skyscrapers framed this fabulous piece of real estate and close by the château-like Plaza Hotel, elegant people strolled in the sharp winter sunlight. Huge limousines cruised silently past the naked trees and at Columbus Circle, tourists prepared for pony and trap rides around the Park's fashionable southern perimeter.

At the other end of the Park in the Nineties and into Harlem a different kind of parade could be seen. Even by daylight, for those foolish enough to venture into that wild and sinister stretch known as the Ramble.

Hopeless people, desperate victims seeking refuge, drug pushers, drug takers, whores, ragged homosexual cruisers, madmen, cripples, beggars. A melting pot of life's flotsam.

And by night a lethal cauldron of violence and sudden death. A black, dank hell that the New York police department chose to ignore.

Trapelli vaulted over the low stone parapet that encircled the perimeter of the park and continued his easy stride along the ash and clinker track that was the favourite route of early morning joggers. His body still ached from the kicking he had received but

the fresh, cold air and weak sunlight had partially restored him. He continued for a mile, past a hump-back bridge that traversed a dry, brackish stream and then cut into the dense overgrowth of the Ramble. Even this early its fearful denizens were on the move. He passed a pair of ragged negroes who were 'snorting' cocaine from a rusted spoon. One of them tipped the white powder from a greasy envelope into the spoon and held it while the other placed one dilating nostril over the little pyramid and drew it sharply up into his mucous membranes. Lost in their deadly ritual, they scarcely noticed Trapelli as he loped past.

A mile further on he stopped and lowered his panting fourteen-year-old body on to a flat rock. He felt better, and the pains were dull now, almost nonexistent. He relit the pinched end of his cigarette and sucked deeply on the acrid smoke. Trapelli was an urban animal, a child who had never known love, or kindness or compassion. Born in a crucible of violence, his mother had died in the throes of a Caesarian section. Torn from her womb, Trapelli had entered the world motherless and his father's grief had turned to hatred soon after the baby had been allowed out of the emergency oxygen tent. By a series of bungling decisions, the child was – amazingly – allowed to go home with his father to be looked after by an equally uncaring stepmother – one of several low class prostitutes who had managed to shack up with Trapelli senior. The child survived countless beatings and near starvation until, at the age of eleven, and still illiterate, his hooker stepmother left Trapelli's father like a rat deserting a sinking ship. The years that followed fashioned Trapelli into an anvil on which his father's ceaseless hammer pounded. Skinny, whey-faced, under-nourished and rodent-like in appearance though he was – Trapelli was also whipcord tough, with the desperate stamina of a continuously hunted animal. Before his fourteenth birthday, which passed uncelebrated, he had robbed a hundred people, raped three girls in the park and half-murdered a homosexual tramp who had approached him on a park bench.

His feelings towards his father were neutral – psychiatrists would later be baffled by this indifference – but Trapelli knew *nothing* except violence and accepted it as the norm. Until, that is, the incident concerning the squirrel.

Trapelli finished his cigarette and pinched the last inch back into

his pocket. A yard away in the bushes a sudden movement made him start, his keen senses alerting him to danger. But it was only a lamesquirrel dragging his injured leg. Fascinated, Trapelli picked the creature up, ignoring its sharp nipping teeth. He nursed it all day, feeding it scraps of bread and peanuts scavenged from the litter bins, and he smuggled it home inside his shirt, later hiding it in a biscuit box so his father wouldn't find it. For three days Trapelli enjoyed his first ever feelings of affection. It was a strange experience – and the boy could scarcely comprehend what was happening to him.

On the fourth day his father found the squirrel and killed it by stamping on its belly. The tiny rodent burst open like a grape, scattering its entrails across the kitchen floor.

Trapelli cried and was beaten for his pains. A month later he ran away from home for ever and boarded a freight train for Chicago. From here he hitch hiked across Middle America until, on the eve of his fifteenth birthday he ended up sleeping on the disused train siding on Santa Monica Boulevard, Beverly Hills, California.

Within days he had penetrated Watts County, the black ghetto of Los Angeles and joined a gang of teenaged pickpockets. Six months later he led the group and had earned the dubious honour of being dubbed the White Nigger. A life of burgeoning crime followed, interspersed with spells in juvenile detention centres. At twenty-two he was a Californian criminal dude with sharp suits, Gucci shoes, a white Cadillac and an apartment in the Hollywood Hills. His physique had filled out and he had no trouble in securing the attentions of avaricious young women. He was violent to them all, being unable to separate ferocity from sexuality – but very few of them complained.

He developed an interest in the manipulation of money and by thirty he had several legitimate businesses which ran profitably alongside his criminal enterprises.

He imported heroin from the Far East and set up the biggest group of pushers on the West Coast to distribute it. He reorganized prostitution in Los Angeles until he controlled most of the high class hookers and call girls in the county.

He ran a hugely profitable protection racket in Florida and opened a chain of expensive massage parlours in New York.

Several police chiefs were on his payroll and two senators on-the-make accepted donations for their campaign funds.

He married a movie star five years his senior and they built a vast mansion outside Malibu with manicured grounds, a pool, tennis courts, stables and a helicopter landing pad. Servants were hired, an English butler, a French chef, Italian maids, a Japanese gardener. It was like the United Nations at home by the sea.

But Trapelli was a troubled man. True happiness eluded him, and he was plagued by a recurring nightmare. In it, his father, who he had not seen for fifteen years, loomed over him, red-eyed and menacing and then in agonizing slow motion the man stomped on his pet squirrel, spurting its guts over the wooden floor. Trapelli would wake trembling and more than once his wife had to shake him to stop the awful, childlike screaming.

He tried therapy but the shrinks were afraid of him and although he paid them handsomely, they dared not tell him the truth.

One hot Californian evening as he sat by his pool smoking and talking with his cronies he received a visitor, a black man called Zero who ran the Watts County rackets for him and was famous for his ruthless efficiency.

Zero had contacts with Black Africa and asked Trapelli if he wanted to open up an operation in Mozambique. The caper was heroin and gold, plus a bit of white slaving as an appetizer on the side. Trapelli, bored with the bland lushness of California readily agreed, and a month later he and six aides were on a jet bound for Africa. The plan was a short holiday – on safari – before they set up meetings with Zero's contacts.

Trapelli hired four Land Rovers, a dozen guides, twelve elephant guns and had a refrigerator welded into one of the Land Rovers. The refrigerator was packed with cans of Budweiser, Bourbon and a little powdered cocaine.

For six days they travelled the African bush, shooting game and getting high on the booze and the 'coke'. Eventually the sport palled, and Trapelli asked Zero to bring the meeting forward.

Zero's contact was duly driven from Mozambique into the bush for a rendezvous at Trapelli's base camp. He was a tall, muscular Zulu who had a prison record even longer than Trapelli's. The two men struck up an instant rapport and Trapelli introduced him to the New York practice of snorting and chasing. A mixture of

cocaine and heroin would be sniffed or snorted, raw, into the nasal passages and chased by six cans of beer, spiked with Bourbon. The Zulu explained his proposition and Trapelli was intrigued. Africa was ripe for a truly sophisticated operation and the profits would be enormous.

Zero, who had acted as interpreter, suggested a formal 'Board' meeting in the City, to sign papers and construct the usual legitimate 'front'.

Trapelli disagreed, he liked the bush with its huge open sky, soaring mountain peaks and lush valleys. He invited the Zulu to stay with them for an extended Safari – and the man was only too pleased to agree.

The following day, replenished with bullets, petrol, whisky, mosquito nets and cameras, the four Land Rovers set off again with Bwana Trapelli in the leading vehicle. He cut a dashing figure in tropical whites and an old-style pith helmet.

They hunted cape buffalo, impala, baboons, and even rhinoceros. Trapelli enjoyed the crack of heavy rifle fire and the sharp smell of cordite. Hearing his soft-nosed bullets smacking into the flesh of moving targets gave him a particular buzz and it wasn't long before Zero and the Zulu had to supply female company for him in the evenings. This was easy, village girls of sixteen were in plentiful supply and the lure of hard cash in these hard-up communities overcame any lingering doubts they may have harboured. Trapelli had the Zulu hose them down before they were sent into his tent and then he enjoyed them with a savagery that bordered on the homicidal.

A week later they were deep into the bush and a supply Land Rover had been ordered to join them with more equipment, food and liquor. On day eight they trundled on to a rocky plateau which looked across an immense valley. Zero and the Zulu erected tents and the paid boys began preparing the evening meal.

Trapelli took a bath, in an oblong zinc container and dressed for dinner in a silk safari suit. As he gulped down a quarter pint of bourbon and lit a cigarette he saw the Zulu crawling over the rocks towards a hole in the dusty, caked ground. The man squatted there on his haunches and waited. After a few minutes something small and furry appeared at the mouth of the hole. The Zulu's hand

snaked out with lightning speed and seized it. Then he appeared to tear the thing in two – like a rag – before raising his fingers to his mouth.

Trapelli prodded Zero with his boot. 'What's he doing?' he demanded. Zero grinned, he'd learnt a lot about the ways of Africa in the past few weeks. 'He's catching a dassie – a stone squirrel – and eating its liver.'

'What?' said Trapelli, stiffening in horror.

'Yeah,' said Zero, 'the idea is to tear the squirrel's liver out and eat it while it's soft and hot – before it hardens – it's a delicacy – like – oh Jesus – I don't know – frogs' legs, maybe – or oysters.'

Trapelli watched the Zulu with fascination. The man's lips were smeared with blood and he was rooting about at the hole, plunging his arm in up to the shoulder. He pulled out another wriggling squirrel and ripped its tiny body open. Then he tore the liver away with his teeth and gulped it down greedily, only pausing to give two or three squelching chews.

Trapelli felt a red mist, sweep in front of his eyes and he fell back across his canvas chair in a dead faint.

May is about the best month of the year in New York. Spring sunshine glances off the steel and glass towers of Manhattan, investing their stark geometry with an almost human aspect. The trees of Central Park have started opening their buds and fresh grass is bursting through the grey, trodden earth attracting birds and tiny insects.

At the top of Fifth Avenue by the château-like Plaza Hotel a yellow cab crunched to a halt outside the main entrance. The doorman, in his olive green uniform, moved swiftly to open the cab door and then recoiled slightly as he saw the occupant, a stooping, dishevelled man in a soiled 't' shirt, leather overcoat and heavy workman's boots.

The man clambered out, beer belly quivering, and paid the driver with a fistful of bills. The doorman exchanged glances with the cabdriver as the man slouched towards the steps of the hotel. Once inside the man hesitated, momentarily in awe of the luxurious surroundings. The lobby was bustling with elegant people, clipped English accents mingling with French, Italian and the laconic

drawl of native New Yorkers. A porter was stacking luggage on to a trolley and a blonde woman in a fur cape was ordering opera tickets from the theatre kiosk in a loud, querulous voice.

The man swallowed nervously and pulled his greasy leather coat across his belly. He felt shabby, unwanted in this glittering place, but the roll of ten dollar bills pressing against his thigh gave him courage.

He approached the bell captain who eyed him coolly, measuring him for a possible trouble-maker or hobo on the scrounge.

'Yes, can I help you?' said the bell captain, resting his hands lightly on the desk next to the alarm button. The man blinked, apparently unsure if it was him that the bell captain was addressing.

'Ah - yeah,' said the man at last. 'I wanna see Mr Trapelli - Room 508.'

The bell captain frowned. Trapelli's suite on the park side of the hotel was a private place, a stronghold that few people knew about. Mr Trapelli the famous businessman rarely received visitors. But the rough looking man had got the room number correct.

'Who shall I say is calling?' said the bell captain.

'Mr Trapelli senior,' said the man - 'His father - that's who I am.'

The bell captain touched his alarm button with a fingertip and a second later the house detective sidled up.

'This gentleman,' said the bell captain, emphasizing the second word, 'is Mr Trapelli's father. Do you know if Mr Trapelli is in?'

The detective pulled a sheaf of papers from his pocket and glanced at them briefly.

'Ah, yes,' he said, 'Mr Trapelli told me to expect you. Unfortunately he's had to go out—'

The old man's face crumpled and for a moment it looked as if he might cry out in anguish.

'But - hey listen to me - my son said to be here. OK. I ain't seen him in years - he sent me money, look!'

A roll of bills were drawn from the greasy overcoat and brandished.

The detective grinned and touched the man's arm.

'Take it easy, Mister. Mr Trapelli said for you to meet him in the park. Down by the old disused grandstand by the Ramble.'

‘The Ramble?’ said the old man. ‘That’s a long way into the park.’

The detective nodded. ‘Sure is,’ he said. ‘But that’s the message from Mr Trapelli – no mistake about it – he said you should be sure to show up. That’s all.’

Three minutes later the old man was in Central Park, hurrying over the hump-back bridge away from Fifth Avenue. His heart pounded with excitement and exertion, already he had two hundred dollars from his son – it arrived this morning – with a promise of more to come.

What a turn up for the book – after all these years – to remember his old man like this. They’d never been close – he’d hated the boy actually – goddamn little pest – but what the hell – he was broke as usual – having just lost his job as janitor in a warehouse for brawling and drunkenness. Two hundred dollars would buy a lot of bourbon – he could taste it already on his parched lips. So what did it matter he hadn’t been a good father? Blood was thicker than water – the boy was rich – he could afford to give him more than two hundred – much more – enough to set him up in style maybe – out in New Jersey with a cupboard full of hooch and a Buick convertible. He’d learn to drive again – after all sixty was no age – sure he’d let himself go – life was pretty cruel – but he could make a fresh start – on his son’s money.

The air was warm and birds chattered in the trees as he plodded on towards the Ramble. He didn’t like that section of the park – it was bad – everybody said so – but it was midmorning – broad daylight – what could happen? Suddenly a thought grabbed him. How would he recognize his son? Jesus Christ he had no idea what the boy would look like. Maybe if he called out his son’s first name – Mario – this would help.

He started calling, in a hoarse, whisky strained falsetto, ‘Mario – it’s me – Mario – Mario!’

Occasionally he stumbled on a root and nearly fell and the sun grew warmer.

Eventually he found the small clearing by the disused grandstand. The undergrowth of shrub and thicket pressed in on all sides. The grandstand was no more than a skeleton of rotting timber and wrought iron covered in graffiti and bird droppings.

‘Mario!’ he called out, and a globule of sweat formed on the

end of his unshaven chin. Suddenly three men appeared ten yards from where he stood. One of them was an enormous negro – the biggest man he'd ever seen – the other two were white and dressed in neat business suits. The taller of the two was sallow complexioned and held a cigar between his teeth.

'Mario?' said the old man, cautiously.

Trapelli nodded. 'Hello, father,' he said, without smiling.

The old man started moving forward, his arms extended.

'Mario,' he said, 'after all these years.'

Trapelli remained motionless, puffing on the cigar, but the big negro suddenly darted forward and a huge butcher's knife appeared in his right hand.

At first the old man couldn't register properly what was happening and he continued his approach of welcome.

The knife hit him just below the sternum and sank hilt-deep into his upper belly, he felt no pain – just a jolting shock – then the blade was swept downwards slicing the front of his body wide open like an envelope. He stared at it in disbelief, glistening tubes, white bone, blood spurting in an arc all over the negro's arms. He died as the negro's fingers closed over his liver and wrenched it free from its anchoring cartilage.

The corpse fell sideways like an old, rotten tree and the Zulu crouched beside it and began eating.

'Pay him,' said Trapelli, and turned away.

From that day on, Trapelli's dreams were sweet ones, and never again did he awake from the nightmare screaming like a child. As his psychiatrist explained, if an unpleasant past experience can be flayed from the subconscious, like an old skin, then it ceases to be. It no longer exists. Two years later Trapelli opened a recreation park for deprived children in New York City. It had trees and swings and lots and lots of squirrels.

Carolyn L. Bird

The black bedroom

Sheldrake finished his cognac and took a cigar from the box on the table. His face was flushed and I could sense that he was about to launch into one of his belligerent diatribes about the state of the nation. I hated Sheldrake, his house, his food, his choice of wines, his politics and his philosophy. In order to mask my loathing which I feared might show itself, I, too, took a cigar and retreated behind a veil of heavy, curling smoke. Sheldrake trumpeted away for some minutes, his face growing more crimson, his argument more fatuous until even his wife, that gross, unlovely creature, stifled a yawn with one plump, sausage-like hand and this seemed to break the spell. He turned his bulging eyes towards me.

'I'm sure Daniel agrees with me?' he said, injecting a whining plea into his exhausted voice. I nodded vigorously, not having listened to a syllable he had uttered.

'Of course, Michael,' I said, affecting a learned, world-weary expression. 'It's no more or less than common sense. That, alas, in this day and age, is in very short supply.'

Sheldrake was pleased with this reply and patted my arm affectionately.

'My dear Daniel,' he oozed. 'More cognac?'

We smoked and drank for another ten minutes until the butler announced that coffee would be served in the library. We walked through the Great Hall, past immense tapestries and priceless oil paintings and I noted with irritation that Sheldrake had hired some additional servants and dressed them in silk knee breeches, powdered wigs and buckled shoes.

Sheldrake's wealth was legendary, and his use of it to pursue power and crush opposition was equally well known. He was chairman of several companies that had been bought 'off the shelf' so to speak and unfortunately one of them had been mine.

As a younger man I had started a small trade magazine which

dealt with the affairs of the advertising industry and although successful, it had never made me, or my fellow directors even remotely wealthy. That we drew large salaries and drove expensive motor cars is true – but the accumulation of capital, particularly in socialist Britain, was almost impossible. I lived well, with a house in Surrey of modest proportions and I had grown accustomed to holidays in the South of France and Venice and also to lunching in some of London's fashionable restaurants. The advertising business, which is distrusted and maligned, is in fact a repository for some of the cleverest and most delightful people in the country. It pays high, sometimes lavish salaries and conducts its affairs, for the best part, in an atmosphere of luxurious dedication. Its practitioners are young and share none of the loathsome, in-bred characteristics of the 'professions'. Not for the advertising man the stifling conformity of the law or the hide-bound and stultifying atmosphere of the Stock Exchange.

The whinnying tones of Eton and the adolescent obsession with 'family background' are no guarantee of success in the advertising business. Merit, and nothing else counts. Thus the dull, chinless fools, sired by an obstinately indestructible upper class are rapidly turned away to seek their amusement in a less demanding environment. But I allow myself to digress.

Sheldrake now owns me. A dreadful confession to be sure, but it is true nonetheless. He bought my magazine a year ago and I still curse the day I accepted his offer. But a quarter of a million pounds to be split between myself and two colleagues was, at the time, a tempting morsel for hungry men. Part of the deal was that I should remain as managing director for a five year period at eighteen thousands pounds a year, plus extras while pocketing the large cash sum obtained from the sale. From the day I agreed to the deal my hatred for Sheldrake had grown like a rampaging cancer. He is a wholly evil man and, through his inherited fortune, intends to build a massive publishing empire to rival that of Beaverbrook, Northcliffe or Murdoch. Until my five years is up, however, I am too cowardly and too dependent on him to speak out and expose him for what he is, and what, ultimately, the world *must* see him as.

His library that night looked sombre, more akin to a movie set for 'Citizen Kane' with its dark mahogany panelling, giant

stone fireplace and shelves of leather spined volumes reaching up to the ceiling. Coffee had been set on a silver tray in front of a crackling log fire and we sat in leather club chairs while Sheldrake occupied a high-backed seventeenth century throne which he claimed he had bought from the Shah of Persia. The other guests, mostly florid bores with family money and poor circulation, brayed at each other across the coffee cups and accepted more brandy from one of the liveried flunkies who had followed us into the library.

I was tired, having motored from Surrey to this Gothic madhouse in Oxfordshire only because Sheldrake wanted me to meet his idiot guests. His summons, for such it was, had indicated that their interest in the magazine might, inexplicably, be good for business. One of the guests, an old Harrovian of almost rodent-like intelligence and manners was neighing about his investments in South Africa while another, an even more fetid parasite of the British ruling class, was belching noisily into his cognac. I marvelled again at the phenomenon of their survival. A decade of socialism, growing daily more rabid, had left these vile creatures unscathed while the middle classes of which I was one, were being reduced to the status of well-heeled serfs, crushed between *them* and a rabble of union-protected, truculent proletarians.

Sheldrake gulped a mouthful of coffee and wiped his gross lips with a handkerchief. In the hall a clock began chiming midnight.

'A spot of shooting tomorrow, Daniel?' he suddenly said, directing his gaze towards me.

I loathe shooting and have never shared the predilection of those Englishmen who, whenever the weather shows promise, feel obliged to kill small birds and animals for sport. I attempted a smile and Sheldrake's jowls quivered, anticipating my reply.

'I'm such a dreadful shot, Michael,' I said politely, 'if you don't mind, I'd prefer to just stay in the house - I have a few papers to attend to - editorial stuff - feature articles which need vetting and so on.'

Sheldrake's smile was glutinous and I knew he thought me weak for declining the shoot.

'Of course, Daniel,' he said, turning to his other guests, 'We'll still have six guns. That will be sufficient.'

An hour later I was undressed and lying between the sheets in

one of the great house's twenty bedrooms. With the velvet curtains drawn, it was inky black and I tried to sleep, in spite of the start of a nagging headache. Downstairs I heard the muffled chiming of the hall clock and the soft creak of floorboards as another guest moved about in the next room. It must have been past three when I finally dropped off but my slumber was fitful and I tossed and turned. Too much rich food and cognac played their part in the weird sado-erotic dreams that I experienced. Finally I sat up and groped for the bedside lamp. It failed to work and I cursed softly in the dense, all-enveloping blackness.

Suddenly, my nostrils were assailed by a rich, aromatic perfume, like that of roses, or some other exotic blossom. In the darkness I was unable to place the direction from which it wafted, but it grew stronger. Then a hand touched my face. A soft, cool, feminine hand. I should, I suppose, have been terrified, but I merely sat quite still.

'Who is it?' I asked, and my matter of fact tone rather pleased me, bearing in mind the circumstances.

A match flared and in its brief illumination I saw a girl with blonde hair wearing a long silken nightdress embroidered with gold swans. I recognized her at once as Sheldrake's adopted daughter. A pretty nineteen year old who Sheldrake doted on, and kept very much out of circulation, when she wasn't at school in Switzerland.

'Nerissa,' I said, half whispering. 'What are you doing here?' She struck another match and held it in front of her face.

'Turning on,' she said, giggling slightly. I could see the enlarged pupils and smell the sweetness of what she had been smoking.

'Your father will be—' I began, but she placed a finger over my lips.

'You hate him, don't you?' she said and giggled again.

'Nerissa—'

She blew out the match and I heard a swish as she took off the flimsy nightdress.

'My god, Nerissa, what are you doing?'

Inky blackness swallowed her like a glove and I felt her naked breasts brush my face. Her tongue filled my mouth and I slid my hands over her warm, silken buttocks.

'Fuck me,' she hissed, 'or I'll scream the place down.'

I was frightened. I felt trapped. But lust seemed to be winning by a wide margin. Her body was soft and yielding and I pushed her on to her belly and slid my leg over her thighs. She buried her face in the pillow and moaned as I thrust deeply into her. It was long, slow and rapturous and her cries of passion were fortunately muffled as I licked her neck and shoulders, my strokes growing stronger, deeper, harder.

Damn Sheldrake. My god what sweet revenge. Exquisite. Unbearable. Our bodies were in savage rhythm now, she raising her hips and spreading her thighs to better accommodate my relentless spearing and each thrust was a stake in Sheldrake's heart. Her muffled cries grew more urgent, I heard myself gasp like a stallion and then it was over, a myriad of stars bursting in my head, my loins liquid fire, her body a cauldron, claspings, greedy, demanding – then softening, collapsing, deflating. It was over. **Damn Sheldrake. Damn him to hell.**

We lay there in the Stygian blackness and I kissed her face and neck, tasting the salt of her sweat and tears. We copulated twice more, and each time she almost broke in two with passion.

Exhausted, finally, she fell asleep in my arms but I lay fearfully awake – now in terror of being discovered.

I had no idea of time, the room being so impenetrably black, but I was at last able to persuade her to leave. With pounding heart I saw her to my bedroom door, but as she skipped wraithlike down the gloomy corridor, I fancied I saw a face glaring at us from the landing. I froze solid with fear, straining my eyes to make out the dark shape. At length, I convinced myself that it was no more than a carved post on the banister and withdrew into my room and fell into bed.

Only the arrival of a servant, two hours later, reminded me that it was dawn. He drew back the velvet curtains and the room was rinsed with sunlight. He placed a tray of tea on my bedside table and withdrew.

As I raised it to drink I noticed the bedroom door opening again. It was Sheldrake, dressed in tweeds and carrying a black, gleaming shotgun. The weapon hung loosely in the crook of his arm but the twin barrels were pointing at my heart.

His eyes met mine and they were like stone. For several seconds neither of us spoke, and then he smiled a frosty smile.

'We're just off, Daniel,' he said. 'You may have to breakfast alone. We should be back in time for luncheon.'

I rose and showered an hour later and then enjoyed a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in the breakfast room. Nerissa seemed to have vanished and our passion of the previous night was like a half-remembered dream.

The shooting party returned at noon but not before I had wandered freely in the house's vast, ornamental grounds, my camera slung about my neck. Sheldrake had a small private zoo which had been constructed on a magnificent sloping site by the great lake and it was here, in the soft autumn sunshine, that I spent most of the morning. There were parrots, toucans, snakes, zebras, giraffes, two superb black panthers – Sheldrake was hoping they would mate – and a collection of exotic monkeys. The monkeys fascinated me, with their grotesque, almost human faces and their gymnastic tricks. One of them, from Java, was completely hairless and caged alone. It crouched on a rock, its pink teats protruding from the leathery chest and gobbled handfuls of dead beetles which had been collected and thrown into the cage. When it saw me staring it bared its yellow pointed teeth and laughed like a hysteric.

I moved on to the panthers' compound and to my surprise, and good fortune, discovered them in the act of mating. I knew that photographs of this would be rare, and possibly valuable, so I began taking pictures, rapidly, moving in close to the bars of the compound.

The male was a sleek, powerful cat with rippling, velvet haunches and as he thrust into the female her legs buckled under his weight. His jaws opened and he fixed his long incisors over her neck, gently but firmly holding her in the position he wanted.

It was savage, but incredibly erotic. I must have lost all sense of time because I had used up two complete rolls of film and was reloading a third when Nerissa came into the compound.

'I've been watching you,' she said. 'I didn't know you were a nature lover,' and she laughed, wickedly, throwing back her head so that I could see her taut white throat.

'About last night—' I said, turning away from the copulating beasts.

‘Shh,’ she said, placing a finger to her lips. ‘Not so loud, you’ll disturb them.’

I shrugged and turned back to the cage. The male was reaching his climax, his tail thrashing, his great flanks churning and the female was pressed hard against the bars of the cage.

I felt Nerissa’s tongue flickering on my neck and turned to her. She was on tiptoe at my side and her eyes were like stars.

‘Doesn’t it excite you?’ she said. ‘So primitive, so natural.’ I tried to look away but I could feel the heat of her body against my arm. We undressed frantically and made love on the flattened earth under the cage. Nerissa screamed at her zenith and received a rumbling growl from the panthers in reply.

As the night before, I was in a panic at the prospect of being discovered but Nerissa calmed my fears.

Still apprehensive, we made our way back to the house and five minutes later, on the stroke of noon, the Land Rovers appeared with Sheldrake and his shooting party.

Lunch was punctuated with much shrill ‘shooting’ talk and Sheldrake babbled on about having more guns made to measure in London while other guests bemoaned the fact that Arab money was driving up the price of weapons and ammunition.

Sheldrake looked at me from behind his glass of port and his face took on the stony expression I had seen that morning.

‘Did you enjoy my zoo?’ he said quietly, and my guilty imagination construed his tone as being full of menace.

I recovered sufficiently to force a smile. ‘Oh, yes, excellent, Michael. I hope to have some splendid pictures – your panthers were mating.’

Sheldrake was pleased with this information and put down his glass.

‘My god, what luck. An offspring would be an absolute coup, Daniel. I do hope you didn’t disturb them.’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t think so,’ I said.

He lit a cigarette and his expression clouded again.

‘Did you like the monkeys?’

I nodded, my sense of unease growing.

‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘I’m sure you did. Elsa, the hairless Javanese is on heat, but I can’t get the other males to cover her. She tends to bite their throats out during copulation, and she’s got venereal

disease. Doesn't worry her, but I don't want my males all poked up to the eyebrows!' He laughed coarsely and poured himself another glass of port.

'And the panthers!' he continued. 'I'm sorry we all couldn't have been there to witness that. Powerful stuff, I've no doubt 'eh, Daniel?'

'Very,' I said, avoiding Nerissa's eyes. She had joined us for lunch, looking very prim and proper in a print dress which buttoned up to the throat. One of Sheldrake's stockbroking oafs was leering at her rather pointedly.

When luncheon was over we spent an extremely boring afternoon playing cards and listening to Sheldrake sound off about the state of Britain, its moral decline, its failure to punish wrong doing and so forth.

Tea was served at five and Sheldrake continued his stream of invective, bankrupt philosophy and gross humour. Blessedly at six he suggested we all break off and amuse ourselves until dinner, which was to be served at nine o'clock sharp.

I watched a little television in my room but soon grew tired of the proletarian buffoons who passed as 'night club' entertainers and decided to read a book. I half hoped and half feared that Nerissa might sneak into my room but I was nevertheless relieved when, by eight forty-five, there had been no sign of her.

Dinner was even more excruciating than lunch. Sheldrake was in a malevolent mood, made no better by the two whole bottles of claret he consumed. I was now terrified that he had guessed about my liaison with Nerissa, particularly as she was absent - with a headache - or so Sheldrake said.

He addressed me directly from time to time, but there was an edge to his voice, a menace even, that turned my blood to water.

It may have been nerves but I became unusually thirsty and drank a good deal more than is my usual custom. By the time we moved into the library for coffee and cognac my head was reeling.

A flunkey poured out several balloons of Hine and I swallowed down at least four. At eleven o'clock I was suffering from mild double vision and seemed to be laughing a great deal, mostly at Sheldrake's execrable jokes. When the party finally broke up, I was almost legless. I shouted good night to the assembled throng and lurched off, crab-like to bed.

I must have fallen instantly into a dark oblivious sleep because the next thing I recalled was the muffled striking of the hall clock at five in the morning.

My drunkenness had lost some of its edge but my senses still reeled and I felt faintly nauseous.

The blackness of the room was at least soothing and I lay there in that inky dark listening to the sounds of my heart and my steady, metronomic breathing. A sudden shift in the temperature of the room made my hair prickle at the nape of my neck. I perceived a rustle at the end of the bed, slightly to the left. I was not alone.

Fear, like a stab wound, flooded my guts and I sat bolt upright. The rustling grew louder and then, in an instant, a clammy hand fell across my chest. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound emerged. Something heavy, warm and breathing sprang up on the bed and lowered itself across my body.

Instinctively I reached up and my fingers closed over a damp, hairless limb. Jesus Christ! Now I knew what it was – that obscene monkey – I could picture its slack, awful mouth with yellow, razor-sharp teeth, its hideous, diseased, leathery female body with the black teats – Jesus – oh Jesus – no – no. I tried to force the vile body away from me but it clung like a limpet to my nakedness, its loins grinding against me, its loathsome tongue slick on my own screaming mouth.

I managed to push my hands up between its trunk and clamp my fingers around its throat, then with the strength born of terror, I began to throttle the life out of it.

The creature's struggles were awful, it writhed and bucked, twisting first this way and then that. But I held firm, screaming all the while at the top of my voice. Finally, with an immense convulsion, the dreadful thing was dead. I flung it from me and slithered from the bed, weeping now like a child.

Light flooded the room and I looked up to seek Sheldrake in the doorway with his shotgun at his shoulder.

To my right, sprawled on the floor where I had thrown it, lay the naked body of – oh Holy Jesus! Nerissa! I had killed her – there was no monkey in the room!

Sheldrake took in the scene and began screaming like a dervish. I knelt up and raised my hands, unable to believe what had happened.

Sheldrake suddenly turned the shotgun towards himself and lowered his open mouth over the twin barrels. When he squeezed the trigger his entire head exploded in a spurt of blood and brains and splinters of gleaming white bone.

When the police arrived, they allowed me to dress before they placed the handcuffs around my wrists and led me quickly to the car that was waiting outside.

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